

Sustainable Being: A Personal Journey Linking Whole Health and Sustainability Education

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Abstract: Sustainable being is the concept of living a lifestyle that is grounded in physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. In this article the author shares how her experiences and learning during a sabbatical in India and Germany helped her make the connection between sustainability education, change initiatives, whole health and heartfelt living. An overview of sustainable being is provided in the context of five principles of living shared by a vedic-eco community in India who is involved in global sustainability efforts. These principles are related to those living in western society with an emphasis placed on the role of sustainable being for educators involved with change initiatives.

Keywords: Sustainability – sustainable being – love – whole health – meditation – teacher education

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“It is not about saying, “Yes, we want to change the world.” Like I said, if we just sit around a table and say, “Yes we want the world to change,” will the world change? No, it will not, only when you change. Why did I say you? Because it depends on each individual person to change. We can’t just scream, “Yes, let’s change the world, let’s make peace in the world,” because everybody can do that. But if the person themselves doesn’t change, what peace will you make outside? So, positive thinking – start with yourself, now, wherever you are.” – Sri Swami Vishwananda

Introduction

When I first heard people in our college of education use the terms “sustainable” and “sustainability” I initially thought about my years as an organic farmer. This had been how I had described our farming practices and produce at farmer’s markets while I was waiting for my official organic certification. The use of the term sustainability was confusing. My cynical mind had thoughts such thoughts as “Oh, this is the reason I am drying my hands on my pants in the bathroom,” as during a recent college remodel all of the paper towels in the bathrooms had been replaced with hand dryers that didn’t quite work. I had no idea that a very short time after several colleagues brought concepts of sustainability to the forefront of college wide initiatives that I, too, would be advocating for our college of education to examine the necessity of incorporating sustainability education into the curriculum.

Education for sustainability is much greater than an intellectual idea, a trendy catch phrase or an add-on to what most of us already do. Sustainability education is, above everything else, a worldview. It is a heart driven way of seeing what we do as teachers and a way of both perceiving the connectedness between all that we do and who we are. It is about understanding with much more than one’s mind how the microcosm of the Self plays a part in the macrocosm of all that exists. Yet there is more needed than just possessing knowledge of sustainability concepts and principles. The power of change comes through the actual experience of this connection to the macrocosm. To fully experience this, to truly make a difference, we all have to start with the Self. This is the story of my own sustainability education paradigm shift and personal transformation. A transformation that moved me, the academic, into a much more heart centered place of living and decision-making. Perhaps sharing the story of how I moved from an intellectual awareness of sustainability to playing an active role in college sustainability education efforts will encourage others to develop their own stories- stories of how one’s personal life supports whole health, how one’s own “being” has become sustainable.

An Idealistic Beginning

Over twenty-five years ago I went to college in the hopes of majoring in environmental science. During my first quarter I attended numerous presentations by graduate students who were working in the field. Through a variety of stories and experiences they all shared the dire state of the planet. This prompted a conversation with one of my environmental education

professors and a subsequent switch of my major to Elementary Education. At that point I believed that if I wanted to preserve our planet for future generations the best way would be to change the thinking of our youth. As an elementary education major, I took additional science classes and looked forward to my first teaching job where I was sure I would begin my efforts at protecting Mother Earth.

There is a much deeper part of our self from which our idealism stems. It resides in our heart or “heart’s mind. Yet too often in western culture we disconnect from that place of Love when challenges arise. So it was for me. I entered the public schools completely unprepared for a classroom of young learners who couldn’t read at grade level, had behavioral problems and parents who actively opposed anything remotely associated with environmentalism. During my first year teaching a woman who presented to the school on the city’s new recycling program received hate letters from students who believed that their parents may lose their jobs in the timber industry if the community began to recycle. I wasn’t even allowed to use the word “environment” in our school. It wasn’t long before I became disheartened. What I believed at the time was professional survival, my idealistic beliefs about saving the planet quickly left and efforts in education rapidly became focused on finding ways to create systems and methods that were more supportive of marginalized populations and struggling learners.

In some ways the shift, while ultimately positive, resulted in a disconnect within. I now am a faculty member in a Department of Special Education where I have spent most of my time immersed in school change initiatives; something that initially seems like a far cry from promoting and supporting sustainability education. Reflecting on my own experience has provided answers to questions about my own pre-service college students who leave the University with so much enthusiasm and quickly become part of the dominant teaching culture, which is often contradictory to the beliefs and values they expounded upon at graduation.

The passion and idealism that one may have, especially when young, can be lost without tools to nourish our Self, our heart. We all need ways to fuel our vital energy. Some individuals are gifted with such tools and many of us need to find them. What human does not want love and happiness? Once this is experienced internally, once found, we have the energy, the strength and love to change the world around us. This is my story of how my lost youthful idealism has been rekindled in a different form and refocused in a healthier sustainable form.

Taking a Break from School Reform

Two years ago I was awarded a sabbatical where I was to write a user-friendly technical manual on assessment for teachers; this followed eight years of working both locally and nationally on a major school reform initiative. The slow and limited response of school districts throughout the United States had been both saddening and disheartening. I had hoped that a break to focus on the writing of this technical manual might also provide time to contemplate the possible reasons why public schools are rarely quick to change, even when an initiative has

documented evidence of benefits for a wide range of children. And, to be honest, I was finding my professional life to be flat and uninspiring while my personal life was flourishing and becoming meaningful and filled with joy.

With all of my data and materials gathered electronically, I left for India. I thought that perhaps a dramatic change in scenery might be rejuvenating. It hadn't occurred to me that a possible answer to challenges with a school reform initiative related to improving learning opportunities for students of all abilities might rest within the concepts of sustainability education and that my professional and personal life would begin to merge. Two years later, I am moving my professional efforts from working with school reform systems to investigating and supporting teachers and administrators in self-development programs and am reconnecting with the heartfelt passion that I had when just starting my career. This shift was catalyzed by several events on my sabbatical.

Sustainability Education – More than Environmental Education

In the last two decades much has changed in terms of society's general awareness of environmental education. As a global community we are much more aware of the tenuous state of the health of our planet and more than ever aware of the marginalization of entire groups of people who are increasingly being affected by climate change. We are constantly reminded through the media of worldwide issues of human rights and social injustice. World leaders have come together repeatedly for the purpose of developing policies to stop environmental degradation and increase humanitarian and human rights efforts. Twenty years after the Rio Earth Summit, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) produced a report on the state of education for sustainable development (ESD). In their recent publication they have stated that:

“...there is increased recognition that this challenge cannot be solved solely through technical advances, legislative measures and new policy frameworks. While such responses are necessary, they need to be accompanied by changes in mindsets, values and lifestyles and a strengthening of people's capacities to bring about change.” (Wals, 2013, p.5)

“supporting and further developing ESD as a catalyst for reorienting education, teaching, learning and professional development towards more holistic, integrative and critical ways of addressing sustainability is paramount....It will also require a better understanding of what these capacities entail and what kinds of qualities and competencies should be developed to enable people and organizations to contribute to SD.” (Wals, 2012, p.6)

After reading this report I realized that sustainability education was not equitable with environmental education as I had naively believed. I also realized there are also differences between education for sustainable development and sustainability education, although they do

share connections. Recognizing this helped to change how I viewed my work, my personal and spiritual life, and assisted me in seeing how these various aspects of my life no longer needed to be compartmentalized and were actually connected. My work with teachers and schools was actually directly tied to sustainability education. To understand this required a change in perspective and my own willingness to re-examine my own life. It required me to reconnect with love within and the development of what is called “sustainable being”. It is my hope that by sharing my experiences others may be encouraged others to rethink the role of sustainability education and assist others in reflecting on how to make one’s own being sustainable.

Finding Meditation – Experiencing Sustainability

Fifteen years ago I attended my first ten-day silent meditation retreat and had subsequently practiced various types of meditation, having experienced the power of calming the mind. In 2008, I met a spiritual master and finally found a meditation practice that seemed perfect for me. Since then I have maintained a consistent and regular meditation practice and my life has completely transformed for the positive. There has been such a profound internal shift. Thus, selecting India as a place to spend time was more than an alternative place to write; I wanted to travel to India to experience the country of origin of many great yogic traditions and experience first hand the culture that had given birth to the heart based practices I had been experiencing.

During the first part of my trip I stayed in a small village called Akkolkot at the Shivpuri Temple and Ayurvedic Center where I underwent a traditional “pancha karma” treatment. Pancha karma is an Ayurvedic medical treatment designed to completely detox one’s physical body. For three weeks, twelve hours or more a day, I did fire rituals (called Agnihotra), took part in a physical asana regime (yoga poses), and was given multiple Ayurvedic treatments including massages, steams, scrubs and underwent additional procedures designed to clean my internal organs. The guru of the center (*guru is a Sanskrit word meaning “remover of darkness” and is often interpreted as meaning teacher*) cautioned that, “Cleansing the physical often brings up much emotion and can make the treatment challenging.” This proved to be true, as much of what I thought I “knew” about who I was and what I believed was challenged at a core level. What I thought was going to be a lengthy and relaxing time at a spa very quickly turned into a challenging time of deep self-reflection.

Simultaneously I was given the wonderful opportunity to get to know the community, visit the schools, spend time with various community groups and learn about their unique sustainability initiatives. All of this highlighted, on a deep and personal level, the importance of sustainability not only for our entire planet but for the health of our communities and the life of each individual. Yes, in a tiny village in India, there exists a humble center leading sustainability initiatives globally! It was here where I experienced first hand ‘arogya’ – a Sanskrit word that describes a state of “whole health”. People connected to promoting physical, emotional, mental

and spiritual wellbeing and doing so from a profoundly deep place of love. Thus, the concept of Arogya can be called in English “sustainable being.”

Shivpuri’s Sustainability Education Initiatives

The Shivpuri ashram is the hub of a global sustainability campaign that was started in the 1940’s by a great spiritual master endearingly referred to by his devotees as “Shreeji.” Now run by his grandson, Dr. Peroshuutum, the center has satellites and training centers throughout the world. The community is built on sustainable principles and their collective service to humanity is to share these powerful practices with individuals around the globe. They strive to combine the “wisdom of Vedic Science and modern technology.” As they state:

“We at ISVS (Institute for Studies in Vedic Sciences) believe that the Vedas are an ancient source of knowledge and information about technologies and sciences to maintain equilibrium between human society and nature. We strongly believe that we can bring a positive, harmonious change in our life with a shift in our paradigms and lifestyles. It is our resolve to spread the word of global harmony and a sustainable lifestyle.” (ISVS, p.3).

To this end, this Vedic-eco community has global initiatives in health, education, agriculture and science. They organize a large sustainability conference each year called “the Vishwa Show” which creates “a platform for individuals and companies working in ecofriendly and green businesses to display their work to an international audience” (ISVS, p. 11)

What touched me was how this community’s efforts were done first and foremost with love, passion and sincere dedication. They are guided by the heart and an outgrowth of love that exists within, not the mind. Moving beyond idealism, they work collectively to make what exists internally available to those around them. The benefits of their practices have been documented, although this has often been done in Marathi or in German making the printed availability to the English speaking world limited. While there, I also learned that many of the scientific studies conducted by Indian researchers often go unread in the west due to the language of the publication and because western journals are not necessary keen on publishing studies whose authors intertwine spiritual beliefs and ideals with science no matter how good the methodology.

Shivpuri’s story began in 1944 when Shri Gajananmaharaj of Akkolkot (Shreeji) shared his mission to “rejuvenate the Vedas”. The Vedas are often seen as holy texts in Hinduism. He summarized the Vedas by stating that there are five principles to live by and it is these principles that underlie their sustainability efforts. In an extremely simplified form they are:

1. Yagna (Agnihotra). Conducting a daily fire ceremony to purify the individual within and the environment. (This also includes the use of practices such as homa farming, which is discussed later);

2. Daan: Sharing freely with others without expectation of anything in return;
3. Tapas: Doing a daily practice, such as meditation or service;
4. Karma: Recognizing that there are consequences for one's actions. Right action leads to a fruitful life, wrong action results in negativity;
5. Swadhyaya: Self-study, or deep self-reflection.

Utilizing these principles this community has grown worldwide and is known globally for their efforts in helping others to develop eco-conscious practices and communities. Some of the tangible outcomes of their spiritual practice are described below.

Homa Farming from Shivpuri

Of particular note are their homa farming initiatives which have had documented results on Black Sigatoka Banana Blight in Central and South America. The farmers at Shivpuri and in other Shivpuri replicated farms grow organically in pest-infested areas and yield three times more from their crops than their non-organic neighbors (Kulkarni, 2010; Bizberg, 1999). They also have higher germination rates using their homa farming techniques. Agnihotra, their short fire ceremonies that are done at sunrise and sunset, have documented health benefits and have shown to decrease disease born pathogens in spaces where the fires occur (Kulkarni, 2010).

Education at a Shivpuri School

While staying in Shivpuri, I had the opportunity to visit their schools and spend time with the children. Each school day started with a fire ritual (agnihotra) and the principles of the Vedas, such as sharing (daan), service (tapas) and right living (karma), are incorporated into the school curriculum. I was astounded that most of the first graders were doing academic work that I typically see done in third grade classrooms here. They do this with less money, fewer school hours and shorter school days and with teachers who have less time in preparation than our western trained teachers. The experience left me with many questions as well as with much hope. How was this possible? How did these principles and practices fit into the West and what, exactly are we missing in our public schools? If such results can be found in poor, rural India, surely a community in the West with ample resources should be able to increase learning outcomes for children.

The Shivpuri Community

The community was made of individuals from all classes and from many different backgrounds. There were families of farmers and there were the families of Bollywood Stars. (Some of the children were noticeable disappointed when I failed to recognize a Bollywood star that came with his wife and in-laws.) Despite educational differences and family economics, the people were united in supporting each other and in sharing sustainable practices with anyone who visited. It seemed that the communities intensive desire to serve others (tapas) might be viewed as advanced "service learning." They feed over 10,000 people a year at their small center

and freely share agnihotra techniques. Their panchakarma center provides health and medical services solely at cost. They truly attempt to live their lives as a reflection of the Vedas, sharing with others, and attempting to make choices that are in alignment with their beliefs about karma.

In a third world country, an eco-community is living happy and fulfilling lives and freely sharing sustainability practices around the world. Why aren't we able to do this in the United States? It was clear that the yagna practice, their service (daan) and the community's belief in karma drove their sustainability efforts. I was surely taking with me valuable ideas and tools as I moved to the next part of my trip, where further reflection on tapas and Swadhyaya (Self reflection) would round out my personal understanding of sustainability and fold into efforts in sustainability education.

Time with My Teacher – Several Months of Quiet Reflection

After two months in the Shivpuri community I left for Germany to attend what I thought would be a 10-day yoga teacher training. It was from this community that I had previously found my current meditation practice, Atma Kriya, a practice in which the outcome is said to be an 'opening of the heart' and connection with the love that innately exists within each individual. Although unplanned, once I arrived I had the opportunity to stay for the next six months. Shree Peetha Nilaya is an ashram located outside of Frankfurt in a quaint German village called Springen. Having recently purchased an old conference center, they have been in the process of renovation and only in 2013 opened fully to the public. This community is young and hasn't fully developed the farming and physical health sustainability practices as the community is Shivpuri, although they do find them important. However, the strength of this community is the focus on the other two Vedic principles described in Shreeji's explanation of the Vedas- Swadhyaya (deep self-reflection) and Tapas (structured and disciplined practices such as meditation, prayers and service). It was here in Springen that I put together the pieces of my personal puzzle together and began to integrate principles of sustainable being fully into my life.

In the community of Shree Peetha Nilaya there are structured daily prayers and an expectation to attempt to engage in seva, which is meant to be "self-less service." My seva task was to transcribe talks given by Swami Vishwananda, the Spiritual Master whose mission is encapsulated in a the simple phrase "just love". My own day was spent in prayer, silent meditation, and daily contemplation on what "love" is. Like the community in Shivpuri, this community seeks to first live from the heart, finding peace and love within and then sharing with others. This short overview fails to give justice to the profundity that I experienced. That said, this personal capstone experience centered the importance of not only living my life as a sustainable being, but the desire to also support others in this journey.

Coming Home and Sharing Sustainable Being

Through my experiences both at Shivpuri and at Shree Peetha Nilaya I realized the concept and importance of "sustainable being" which I now believe is a key underpinning of all

sustainability initiatives. Sustainable Being is the concept that each individual benefits from life style choices that promote healthy minds, bodies emotions, and spirituality, making one's Self and life "sustainable." Sustainability extends beyond environmental activities, economic policies and social justice. Sustainable Being seeks to incorporate actions and activities that support personal and sustainable lifestyles so that each individual has the personal capacity to contribute, in a healthy and sustainable way, to the broader local and global community. It is first and foremost centered on the true Self, the heart. It starts with finding the love to love one's Self.

After six months of deepening my own personal practice and many experiences providing personal insight into my "Self", I finished my manual on teaching written expression and have since returned to the University. Although my job appears to be the same, I have a completely renewed focus and changed views on challenges and potential solutions in school reform. I have also returned inspired to return to academic life with a changed (or enhanced) research agenda that includes sustainability as a focus. For example, in the Spring of 2013 I conducted a research study on the effect of meditation on pre-service teachers anxiety and depression levels.

I have realized the need for myself in my own life to try and separate or compartmentalize and control all aspects of my life. Finding the balance within each area and feeding all aspects of my being- spiritual, mental, emotional and physical has made me not only a happier and healthier person but am now a better friend, co-worker, teacher and mother. I can now be more available for others because I have first been available to love my true Self.

The United Nations Rio Summit in Brazil 2012 called for a set of sustainable development goals (SDG). Building on this framework, several researchers have proposed six connected goals: (1) thriving lives and livelihoods; (2) food security; (3) water security; (4) clean energy; (5) healthy and productive ecosystems; and (6) governance for sustainable societies (Griggs et. al., 2013). No longer can I see sustainability as solely an environment movement and it clearly has not been viewed as such by those working in sustainability initiatives.

I've developed a bigger understanding of sustainability and have deepened respect for my colleagues who are leading initiatives at our university in the area of sustainability education. I now see my role personally - where I fit into the landscape of sustainability. I have newfound beliefs as to the challenges with school reform. It comes down to sustainability and the idea of sustainable being. For *me* to successfully navigate my day, *I* need to make healthy lifestyle choices. *I* need to be conscious of how my actions affect others and my self (karma). *I* need to utilize tools that keep my mind calm and my emotions in balance (tapas), and I need to share (daan). Each day *I* need to reflect on how I navigated my world and on what my impact was on those around me and that which sustains me, this earth (Swadhyaya). I need to walk my own spiritual path. Stress crosses all cultures. For teachers to successfully deal with the wide variety of issues that they face, including the diverse classrooms of today, they too must be able to successfully manage stress and engage in critical and deep self-reflection. They too must find

whole health – *Arogya*- sustainable being. Each individual deserves the opportunity to create sustainable being for him or herself.

Sustainable Being and Teachers

What does sustainable being have to with teachers and school reform? Everything. A sustainable being, *a sustainable teacher*, is vital to any reform effort. There are four key prongs to fostering sustainable being: physical wellbeing, mental and emotional wellbeing and spiritual wellbeing.

Physical Wellbeing. Our physical body is literally our vehicle for change. Physical energy provides the stamina for prolonged effort and teachers must be physically healthy. Without a well working physical body our major tool for change becomes limited. Large change initiatives require energy. A lack of physical wellbeing leads to a vicious cycle of low energy and limited availability for children, let alone school change. Some illness leads to being physically absent whereas other forms of illness lead to decreased energy and or availability to be emotionally and mentally present.

We have learned so much as a society about how to take care of the physical being. Engaging in exercise that is self-loving and regular keeps our muscles strong. Eating whole foods and being conscious that what we put in our bodies has a direct impact on how we feel and function. Our food choices also have an impact on the planet; consuming sustainably grown and organic food supports both our own physical wellbeing as well as Mother Earth. The converse is also true; consuming junk foods, processed foods or genetically modified food not only impacts our physical being, it also has negatively impacted the planet. Taking care of and respecting our bodies is a major step towards Self-love and physical wellbeing.

Schools provide a great place to support one another with making good physical choices. For example, a friend recently shared how a group of teacher bring salad fixings two days a week to support healthy eating choice. Taking walks before or after school or intentionally planning time to hike or bike on the weekends can assist in taking care of the physical being.

Mental and Emotional Wellbeing. Change requires paradigm shifts. Whether subtle or drastic, any changes in ways of doing business or changes in self-perception require one to be able to view things from multiple perspectives. To do this one has to have the ability to set one's ego aside and only mentally healthy people can readily do this. Tied to mental health is emotional health. In addition to letting go of old ways, one must be able to interact with multiple personalities, manage a myriad of complex personal relationships and do so with compassion and kindness. Change initiatives require hard and critical conversations that begs emotional stability.

This is particularly challenging in schools where the nature of the work requires people to work together as an extended family. Because so many have challenging issues with their own home based families, the additional dynamics within a school can be overwhelming. There is no

one simple solution to mental and emotional health. Each person needs to exercise tools that support peace, first within. Recently a colleague showed me the wrist mala she was wearing and said, “I will be using this at our staff meeting.” She wasn’t joking. A powerful tool is the use of mantra, or quietly repeating a positive phrase. This calms the mind and can calm heated emotions that arise in challenging settings. There is such a growing array of community options for supporting individuals- yoga classes, meditation classes, and support groups. Teachers who choose to seek support can find low cost and even fun solutions!

Spiritual Wellbeing. Spiritual wellbeing differs for everyone and, of course, may be influenced by one’s cultural and familial upbringing. However, this is far from religious affiliation, dogma or blind belief in a higher power. It is more than just meditation or just doing yoga, although these tools can be used to foster spiritual wellbeing. In the U.S. we have the clear separation of church and state. Our western culture has unfortunately confused religion and spirituality. They are two different things and has often kept each of us from simply discussing spirituality both the workplace and in public settings. I have often described spiritual wellbeing as “knowing that one has a purpose” or “the desire or longing to find peace within one’s Self.” As one friend shared, “I don’t sit and do meditation like my wife. For me, I find so much tranquility when I walk by myself along a river or by simply being in nature.” He also devotes much of his free time to promoting sustainability education efforts; he clearly has found a life’s purpose.

Teachers sometimes share that they feel “called” to be a teacher or that they have a deep sense of “knowing “ that working with children is their gift to humanity.” Some may actually find spirituality tied to their work in the classroom. Spirituality is cultivating the capacity to love and living from the heart. Spirituality is living with purpose and being aware of one’s Self in the world. Ultimately when cultivating spiritual wellbeing, the sense of purpose becomes established and inner peace begins to grow and can become more apparent in one’s daily life.

Sustainable Being as Part of Sustainability Education

Sustainability starts with the Self. We all must develop lifestyles that sustain our being. As a healthy, inwardly peaceful individual, we grow the inner strength within necessary for all the other sustainability efforts that are ultimately necessary for complete and balanced global health. When I looked at the recent pie chart provided by Griggs and colleagues (2013) that I mentioned earlier, where they outlined six sustainable development goals, I now see more fully how each piece of the pie is connected and necessary to support the others. I also see my own personal role and contribution in the area of thriving lives and livelihoods. While everyone has a part to play each individual has varied interests, and, underneath all lies the importance of first ensuring that each of us is living in a way to support “sustainable being”. From this place we are given limitless energy to serve and improve those systems that must be built in sustainable ways for not only our children’s children, but for generations to come. Just as the quote from Swami Vishwananda at the beginning of this story says, “Start with yourself.”

A few days ago I visited a temple in a nearby city. As I was leaving a young man in the back stopped me and asked, “What is it like to be a Hindu in a white woman’s body?” I had to ask him to repeat the question because I wasn’t sure I heard him correctly. I don’t see myself as being associated with any one religion. I laughed and said, “Well, sometimes it is kind of hard because I never really feel like I am home. Yet, at the same time, it is wonderful because I get to experience the love of all of this.” He simply smiled. Creating a sustainable life for oneself isn’t about giving up one’s traditions, religious upbringing or culture. It isn’t about being Hindu or belonging to one tradition (although sometimes visiting or borrowing from another’s tradition enriches one’s own Self). It is about each individual being given an opportunity to find that which gives his or her life purpose, what feeds one’s soul, and making the time and space to engage in activities that are healthy for the mind, body, community and one’s own personal view of spirituality. When one approaches the challenges in life from a center of peace and a deep sense or awareness of wellness, one then has the energy to influence that which needs to change. This is whole health, Arogya. This is Sustainable Being.

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Images



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Farm at Shivpuri, Akkolkot, India



Traditional Pancha Karma Huts at Shivpuri



Shree Peetha Nilaya in Springen, Germany