

Bridging East and West: Eastern–Western Synthesis for Sustainable Societies*

*Retanti Talukder***

Abstract

The world is facing connected crises such as climate change, inequality, war, and social and spiritual disconnection. Western sustainability frameworks like the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) have encouraged organisations to consider people, planet, and profit, but in practice they often remain profit-centred and vulnerable to greenwashing. Buddhist ethics, by contrast, place inner transformation, non-harm, and compassion at the heart of human action. This paper proposes an integrative approach that combines the structural strengths of the TBL with the ethical depth of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path. Drawing on literature from sustainability studies, Buddhist ethics, ecological economics, and systems thinking, this paper develops the Inner–Outer Sustainability Model. The “outer” layer reflects the TBL-based structures such as policies, indicators, and institutional practices. The “inner” layer is grounded in the Eightfold Path, which offers guidance

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** Interdisciplinary researcher, Affiliation: Nord University. Email: retantitalukder@gmail.com

on right view, intention, livelihood, and mindfulness. Together, they show how ethical awareness and institutional design can reinforce one another. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) framework and Patagonia's values-based business model provide the two central cases. GNH shows how Buddhist-inspired values can shape national planning and policy, while Patagonia illustrates how similar ethical commitments can be expressed in corporate practice. The Nordic welfare states serve as a comparative context to show how secular welfare institutions can support the TBL outcomes. The paper argues that integrating the TBL with the Eightfold Path can help move Bhutan and other societies towards "ethically grounded sustainability", where wellbeing, fairness, and ecological care guide decisions. It concludes by highlighting future research opportunities on how inner transformation and structural reform interact in Bhutanese policy, leadership, and education.

Keywords: sustainability, Buddhist ethics, Triple Bottom Line, Gross National Happiness, systems thinking

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century is defined by a set of overlapping global crises. Climate change, rising inequality, geopolitical tensions, and a growing sense of social and spiritual disconnection are placing pressure on societies and ecosystems around the world (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2023; Sachs, 2015; Chancel et al., 2022). Modern systems still prioritise short-term profit and consumption, which often disconnects economic activity from ethical responsibility (Schumacher, 1973; Zsolnai, 2008; Jackson, 2009; Sachs, 2015; Brown & Zsolnai, 2018). From a Buddhist perspective, this profit-led modernity rests on what Kovács (2011) calls the "unlimited growth" myth of Western culture. This myth began to weaken with critical works such as *Silent Spring* and *The Limits to Growth* (Carson, 2002; Meadows et al., 2008). Kovács (2011) argues that sustainable development emerged as a response to the "unlimited growth" myth, yet he maintains that it still operates mainly within a

scientific-materialist paradigm focused on technological and economic progress rather than ethical transformation.

Western sustainability frameworks such as the TBL were developed to expand the meaning of organisational success by including social and environmental goals (Elkington, 1997). While the TBL has been influential, many scholars argue that it does not go far enough (Rambaud & Richard, 2015; Hahn et al., 2014; Milne & Gray, 2013).

In practice, sustainability efforts often remain selective or symbolic, with reporting frameworks functioning more as rhetorical devices than transformative tools (Gray, 2010). While economic priorities dominate, the social or environmental goals receive secondary treatment (Hahn et al., 2014; Gray, 2010; Milne & Gray, 2013). This focus leaves little room for the inner dimensions of sustainability, such as values, intentions, and ethical awareness (Hahn et al., 2014; Wamsler & Brink, 2018; Verma, 2019). UNESCO (2017) similarly emphasises that education for sustainable development must include inner competencies such as systems thinking, self-awareness, and normative judgement to complement policy and structural reforms.

These limitations have generated growing interest in approaches that combine external reforms with inner transformation. Researchers suggest that sustainable change requires not only new policies and systems, but also ethical awareness, empathy, and a sense of shared responsibility (Jakobsen, 2017; Verma, 2019; Darlington, 2018; Wamsler & Brink, 2018). As argued within ecological economics, an organic worldview that reconnects economy, nature, and humanity is essential for sustainability. It must be driven by ethics rooted in our ability to imagine the future empathetically for all life forms (Jakobsen, 2017; Brown & Zsolnai, 2018). Buddhist philosophy offers practical guidance for these inner dimensions. The Noble Eightfold Path emphasises mindfulness, compassion, balance, and an understanding of interdependence (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Verma, 2019;

Darlington, 2018). These principles can help address the internal motivations that shape human behaviour.

Although interest in these perspectives is increasing, there is still a clear gap in current sustainability models. Research on spirituality and sustainability has grown significantly, particularly after 2015, yet remains theoretically fragmented (Dissanayake et al., 2024). To date, no widely established sustainability framework has systematically integrated the institutional logic of the Triple Bottom Line with the ethical structure of the Noble Eightfold Path into a single coherent model. Most studies treat structural sustainability tools and inner ethical transformation as parallel but separate domains. This paper responds to that gap by proposing an Inner–Outer Sustainability Model that connects structural sustainability (TBL-based policies and systems) with ethical and contemplative values (Noble Eightfold Path). The originality of this model lies not merely in combining Eastern and Western perspectives, but in demonstrating how ethical intention can function as a structural corrective to outcome-based sustainability frameworks. While the TBL primarily evaluates measurable results, the Eightfold Path evaluates intention and volitional action (Elkington, 1997; Bodhi, 2010). This distinction helps explain why sustainability tools can become symbolic when ethical motivation is absent.

The study draws on literature from sustainability studies, ecological economics, systems thinking, and Buddhist ethics. It explores how the Noble Eightfold Path can strengthen the TBL by shifting it from a mainly profit-oriented tool to a more balanced and values-driven approach (Bodhi, 2010; Sachs, 2015). Examples from Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness framework, Patagonia’s sustainability practices, and Nordic welfare governance as a secondary comparative reference, show how inner values and outer systems can work together in real-world contexts (Karma Ura, Sabina Alkire, Tshoki Zangmo, & Karma Wangdi, 2012; Kettunen, 2025; Sachs, 2015; Talukder, 2025). The field is expanding geographically, with the United States, India, and Australia emerging as

leading contributors, indicating a global shift in sustainability thinking (Dissanayake et al., 2024).

This leads to the central research question: How can integrating the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path transform the Triple Bottom Line into a more ethically grounded and interconnected approach to sustainability?

By addressing this question, the paper advances sustainability theory beyond the weak-strong sustainability dichotomy toward what it terms “ethically grounded sustainability.” This third stage incorporates moral intention as a constitutive dimension of sustainable development and offers a mechanism-based bridge between inner transformation and institutional reform. In doing so, the TBL is reframed from a primarily measurement and reporting tool into a values-guided decision-making framework, where ethical intention and non-harm may help reduce greenwashing and short-termism.

This paper positions Bhutan and Patagonia as the two central cases for exploring how Buddhist-inspired ethics can guide contemporary sustainability practice. Bhutan at the level of national policy (GNH) and Patagonia at the level of corporate strategy, while the Nordic region provides a secondary comparative context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Western Sustainability Frameworks and their Limitations

The Triple Bottom Line expanded the idea of organisational performance by including social and environmental goals alongside profit (Elkington, 1997). This framework encouraged many institutions to think more broadly about responsibility and to report on their environmental and social impact. However, many scholars argue that the TBL has not delivered the deep change it promised (Rambaud & Richard, 2015). In practice, financial priorities still dominate the TBL, causing sustainability efforts to remain selective or symbolic and

vulnerable to greenwashing when ethical intent is not central (Gray, 2010; Milne & Gray, 2013; Delmas & Burbano, 2011).

The TBL reporting often becomes outcome-focused and metric-driven, reflecting a consequence-based logic (Hahn et al., 2014; Gray, 2010). This reflects a utilitarian orientation, where outcomes justify action, whereas Buddhist ethics evaluate action primarily through intention and volition (Rachels & Rachels, 2019; Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009). This helps explain *why* TBL can be structurally prone to greenwashing. It appears to allow positive outcomes, even if motivations are harmful. This dynamic encourages selective disclosure and greenwashing when ethical intent and truthfulness are absent. Buddhist ethics fills this gap by emphasising volitional action and ethical intention (Right Intention, Right Livelihood) (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Verma, 2019).

This dynamic contributes to greenwashing, where positive results are emphasised while negative impacts are downplayed (Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Kovács, 2011). It also reflects a strong focus on technical indicators, while inner dimensions such as intention and ethical motivation receive limited attention (Hahn et al., 2014; Wamsler & Brink, 2018; Verma, 2019).

Rambaud and Richard (2015) argue that the TBL reinforces existing economic priorities because financial capital remains protected, while natural and human capital are not genuinely preserved as capital stocks. This links to weak sustainability, where natural and human capital are treated as substitutable resources and trade-offs are allowed (Zadek, 2001; Neumayer, 2013; Jakobsen, 2017). This reinforces concerns that without ethical intention, sustainability frameworks remain structurally aligned with capital maintenance rather than ecological responsibility (Gray, 2010; Rambaud & Richard, 2015).

The notion of “green growth” risks overlooking underlying structural problems rather than resolving them (Jakobsen,

2017). Scholars argue for a shift toward “qualitative development,” which enhances quality by emphasising human values such as wellbeing, fairness, and ecological health rather than exponential quantitative growth (Jakobsen, 2017; Jackson, 2009). Translating to economics, the organic worldview leads to an eco-centric cooperative economy where all kinds of activity are interrelated and mutually supportive (Jakobsen, 2017). These critiques suggest that current Western frameworks need a stronger ethical foundation to guide real behavioural and institutional change (Kovács, 2011).

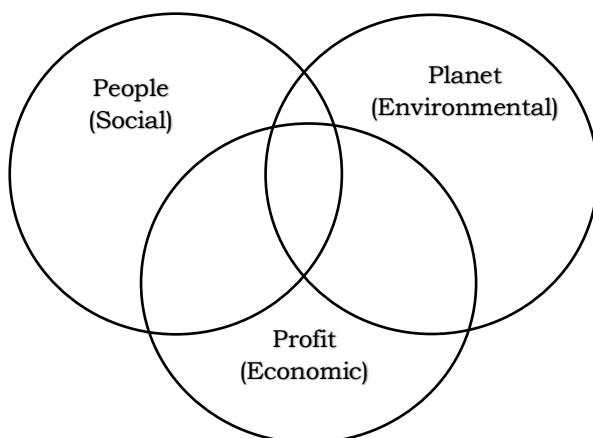


Figure 1. Triple-bottom line model (Elkington, 1997)

2.2 Buddhist Ethics and the Principle of Balance

Buddhist philosophy offers an ethical approach focused on non-harm, compassion, moderation, and an understanding of interdependence (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Kovács, 2011). The Noble Eightfold Path encourages wise intention, ethical behaviour, and mental clarity. These principles help individuals understand how their actions shape social and ecological outcomes (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009).

This ethical emphasis aligns with sustainability thinking, which seeks balance between environmental protection, social wellbeing, and economic stability. Buddhist ethics can help

decision-makers and organisations adopt long-term and responsible behaviour by grounding decisions in care, awareness, and restraint (Schumacher, 1973; Zsolnai, 2008; Brown & Zsolnai, 2018). Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness framework is a practical example of how cultural and spiritual values can shape national policy and development strategies (Karma Ura et al., 2012; Brooks, 2013; Darlington (2018).

As discussed in Section 2.1, mainstream sustainability frameworks often overlook inner motivations, focusing instead on technical solutions and measurable outputs. Buddhist ethics helps address this gap by emphasising intention, non-harm, and interdependence (Verma, 2019; Kovács, 2011). From this perspective, Kovács (2011) explicitly describes sustainable development as secondary to what he calls “sustainable inner development”. This emphasis on “sustainable inner development” anticipates the inner layer of the Inner–Outer Sustainability Model developed in Section 4.

2.3 Buddhist Perspectives on Economics

Buddhist economics challenges conventional economic assumptions by questioning endless growth and emphasising simplicity, meaningful work, and non-violence (Schumacher, 1973; Brown & Zsolnai, 2018, Zsolnai, 2008; Kovács, 2011). Schumacher (1973) introduced these ideas to Western audiences, proposing that the purpose of economic activity should be to support human wellbeing rather than accumulation. Buddhist economics contrasts with the neoclassical paradigm. Whereas neoclassical economics begins with the self-interested individual, Buddhist economics begins from the principle of non-self. The aim is to minimise suffering rather than to maximise profit. It relies on the development of consciousness instead of instrumental rationality and favours cooperation instead of competition (Jakobsen, 2017; Kovács, 2011).

More recent scholars expand on this perspective. Brown & Zsolnai (2018) emphasises responsible consumption, compassion, wellbeing and shared prosperity within ecological

limits. Zsolnai (2008) highlights interdependence, moral awareness, non-violence and reduced attachment to consumerism. Verma (2019) explains how understanding cause and effect strengthens ethical responsibility and environmental awareness.

Bhutan's GNH remains a leading example of how Buddhist economic thinking can inform national development (Kovács, 2011). Instead of focusing on GDP, Bhutan measures psychological wellbeing, cultural strength, ecological resilience, and community vitality (Karma Ura et al., 2012). This approach shows how inner values can guide public policy and shape broader economic systems. Natural growth should be at the foundation of a healthy economy, rather than conventional linear measures like GDP, which need to be replaced with more holistic and qualitative alternatives (Jakobsen, 2017; Brown & Zsolnai, 2018).

2.4 The Noble Eightfold Path as a Complementary Sustainability Framework

Sustainability in a Buddhist sense means (i) ensuring appropriate material wellbeing, (ii) accomplishing non-harming in economic activities, and (iii) realising inner freedom from suffering. Economic sustainability is thus treated as a by-product of ethical and spiritual practice rather than a stand-alone objective (Kovács, 2011). This distinction underpins the Inner–Outer Model developed later in this paper. The Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path includes principles related to wisdom, ethical conduct, and mental discipline (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009). These principles offer a structured way to cultivate mindfulness, ethical intention, and responsible action. When combined with sustainability frameworks, they help explain why some institutions may adopt sustainability goals but fail to act on them in a meaningful way.

Right View, as defined by Bodhi (2010), is grounded in understanding the Four Noble Truths, ethical causality (karma), and the impermanent and selfless nature of phenomena. When applied to sustainability, this epistemic

foundation can support an expanded awareness of systemic interdependence and long-term ecological consequences (Hanh, 2009; Brown, 2004; Verma, 2019). Organisations guided by this perspective are more likely to respect ecological limits and consider the needs of future generations. Talukder (2025) argues that integrating principles such as Right View, Right Intention, Right Action and Right Livelihood can guide businesses toward more ethical and socially responsible strategies. In Buddhism the development process associated with the Noble Eightfold Path is not a material growth trajectory but an inner, spiritual advancement. Right View therefore reframes sustainability. It does not try to protect a specific growth path, but seeks inner freedom supported by a modest and sufficient material base (Kovács, 2011).

In this sense, the Eightfold Path does not replace the TBL; rather, it strengthens it by adding a clear ethical and psychological base. This complements the TBL's structural focus discussed earlier.

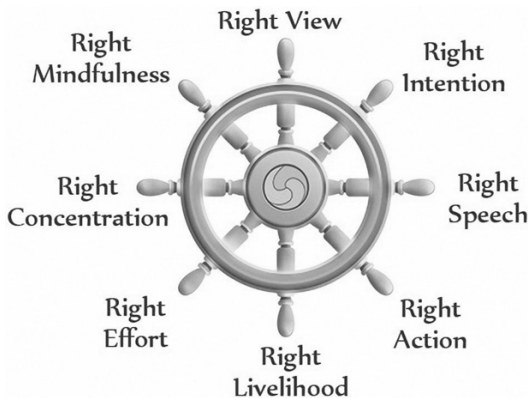


Figure 2. The Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path (The Middle Way).
Source: (Mishra, 2018).

2.5 Toward an Integrated East–West Sustainability Model

Weak sustainability reflects a mechanistic worldview that treats nature as separate and substitutable, while strong sustainability reflects an organic worldview that sees economy,

society, and nature as interdependent systems (Jakobsen, 2017; Neumayer, 2013).

Jakobsen (2017, p.236-37) contrasts the self-interested “economic man” with the cooperative “ecological man,” who recognizes interdependence and acts with empathy and responsibility. He emphasizes a move away from a mechanistic view of the universe toward an understanding of the universe as something alive, self-organizing and flourishing. We learn from nature instead of dominating it (Jakobsen, 2017, p.218-219).

Recent research highlights the importance of inner dimensions such as intention, awareness, and mindset in shaping sustainable behaviour (Verma, 2019; Wamsler & Brink, 2018; Kudesia, 2019). Bibliometric evidence shows increasing scholarly interest in integrating ethical, cultural, and spiritual values into sustainability discourse (Dissanayake et al., 2024). Transformative sustainability practice is grounded in competencies such as systems thinking, anticipatory action, ethical reflection, and self-awareness (UNESCO, 2017). For example, Kudesia (2019) describes mindfulness as a metacognitive practice. It helps people notice and adjust how they process information, and in this way links inner awareness directly to organisational routines and decision-making. These insights support the idea that structural approaches need to be complemented by ethical and contemplative perspectives.

Bhutan’s national reforms offer early evidence for this integration, where inner values rooted in GNH are operationalised through outer systems such as ECCD expansion and the National Education Assessment Framework (NEAF). These reforms explicitly link wellbeing, equity, and assessment quality to national planning, demonstrating how ethical intention can shape structural governance (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2018–2021).

Linking Buddhist ethics with strong sustainability and systems thinking provides a deeper foundation for transformation (Neumayer, 2013; Zadek, 2001; Meadows, 2008; Darlington, 2018). The main challenge is to build an economic system that supports life processes instead of only extracting resources. At the same time, it should give priority to utopian vision, dialogue, and cooperation (Jakobsen, 2017; Jackson, 2009). This resonates with the Buddhist Middle Way and the doctrine of dependent origination, which highlight balance and interdependence in social and ecological systems (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Brown, 2004).

The integrated perspective encourages a shift from profit-driven decision-making toward values-driven intentions that support long-term wellbeing (Brown & Zsolnai, 2018; Hahn et al., 2014; Jackson, 2009; Zsolnai, 2008). It also provides a foundation for the conceptual model developed in this paper, which links inner ethical awareness with outer sustainability structures.

Sustainable transformation begins with moral intention. Ethics bridges inner consciousness and external practice by connecting personal awareness with social and ecological responsibility (Jakobsen, 2017). This is supplemented by Verma (2019) arguing that sustainable development can only be achieved through a balanced integration of inner transformation and outer socio-economic arrangements. Kovács (2011) suggests that when sustainability is grounded in non-harming, simplification of desires, and generosity, economic and ecological resilience tend to arise as consequences rather than as isolated targets.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a conceptual design, integrating literature rather than collecting primary data. Instead, it builds a new framework by bringing together insights from different bodies of literature. The work is interpretive, inductive, and model building in nature (Bryman, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Melnikovas, 2018).

The study follows an interpretivist philosophy. It assumes that reality, and especially ideas like “sustainability”, “ethics”, and “wellbeing”, are shaped by human meanings and values, not only by objective facts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Melnikovas, 2018).

The paper also takes an inductive approach. It does not start with a hypothesis to test. Instead, it starts from existing theories and concepts and then builds a new model step by step (Bryman, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The aim is to integrate ideas from Western sustainability frameworks and Buddhist ethics to form a new way of understanding “true sustainability”.

The research design can be described as a conceptual synthesis with illustrative cases. The main “data” are theories and concepts from published literature. The cases of Bhutan, Patagonia, and the Nordic welfare states are not treated as empirical case studies in a strict sense. They are used to illustrate how the proposed model might apply in practice (Bryman, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

3.1 Research Purpose and Philosophical Orientation

An interpretivist orientation guides this work. Interpretivism focuses on how people interpret and give meaning to the world around them (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Melnikovas, 2018). This is suitable because the paper deals with values, intentions, and spiritual or ethical ideas. It also compares how different traditions, Buddhist ethics and Western sustainability frameworks make sense of human behaviour, institutions, and social change.

Within the “research onion” logic, this means the study is placed at the intersection of interpretivist philosophy, inductive reasoning, and a qualitative, conceptual strategy (Bryman, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Melnikovas, 2018).

3.2 Literature Selection and Analytical Process

The study is based on a structured reading of four main bodies of literature:

1. Sustainability studies and the Triple Bottom Line
2. Buddhist ethics and philosophy
3. Ecological economics
4. Systems thinking

Sources were chosen because they offer clear theoretical or conceptual insights that relate to inner and outer dimensions of sustainability. In other words, the focus was on ideas, not on empirical data sets (Bryman, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

The analysis followed three steps:

1. Identify key concepts in each field, such as the TBL, strong sustainability, dependent origination, the Noble Eightfold Path.
2. Group these concepts around themes like inner motivation, structural systems, ethics, and transformation.
3. Compare and connect these themes to see how they can complement each other and where they fill gaps.

This process is inductive and interpretive. Concepts are compared and linked until a new, integrated model emerges (Bryman, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Melnikovas, 2018). The aim is not to measure or test, but to clarify, connect, and reframe.

3.3 Development of the Conceptual Model

The Inner–Outer Sustainability Model grew out of this conceptual synthesis. The model did not exist in advance. It was built step by step as patterns and connections appeared in the literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Melnikovas, 2018).

Two main building moves guided the model-building:

1. First, the study examined how the Triple Bottom Line (people–planet–profit) structures sustainability in organisational and policy settings.
2. Second, it examined how the Noble Eightfold Path structures inner ethical development through right view, intention, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

The model acts as a bridge between inner values and outer systems (Bryman, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

3.4 Role of Cases in the Study

Bhutan and Patagonia are used as the two central illustrative cases, while the Nordic region serves as a contextual comparator. They are not sampled in a formal way, as in empirical case study research. Instead, they are purposefully selected examples. Bhutan represents a national model where Buddhist values shape development indicators (e.g., GNH), and Patagonia represents a private company with strong value-based sustainability practices. The Nordic welfare states provide a secular welfare context with high social trust and long-term governance against which these central cases can be contrasted. They demonstrate how the model may be applied in practice, without claiming to prove it. They do not “prove” the model, but they show that its ideas are plausible and relevant in real-world settings (Bryman, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

In methodological terms, this use of cases aligns with an interpretive, conceptual design rather than with a formal comparative case study that would require systematic data collection, coding, and cross-case analysis (Bryman, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

3.5 Foundation for Future Empirical Research

Although this paper is conceptual, it is designed as a conceptual foundation for subsequent empirical research. The model can be tested and refined in future studies.

Possible next steps include:

1. Qualitative studies of policy processes in Bhutan and Norway, exploring how values shape decisions.
2. Organisational research on how mindfulness, purpose-driven leadership, or ethical intention influence sustainability practice in firms.
3. Educational research on how contemplative and ethical learning affects students' attitudes to sustainability.

In terms of research design, these future studies could use qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods. The key point is that they would build on the conceptual groundwork provided here (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Melnikovas, 2018).

Thus, this paper contributes at the theoretical level. It offers a clear model and a set of concepts that later researchers can translate into research questions, variables, and empirical strategies (Bryman, 1988; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

4. Results: Conceptual Framework and Model Development

4.1 The Inner–Outer Sustainability Model

The Inner–Outer Sustainability Model connects ethical awareness (inner) with institutional systems (outer). Sustainability becomes credible only when motivation (why) and structure (how) reinforce one another. The model consists of two layers: an inner ethical foundation and outer structural systems. The inner layer draws on the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path, and the outer layer on the TBL. This perspective aligns with interpretivist and systems-based sustainability research. This recognises that values and mindsets shape governance outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Wamsler & Brink, 2018; Meadows, 2008). Ethically grounded sustainability, therefore, extends beyond reducing emissions or meeting targets (Jackson, 2009; Sachs, 2015; Darlington, 2018). It is about cultivating awareness, humility, and responsibility. When organisational systems are informed by wisdom and policy is guided by compassion, sustainability

shifts from a strategic tool to a normative orientation and cultural practice.

The TBL provides a framework for firms to balance three 'Ps': profit, people, and planet. The Eightfold Path shapes how the firm makes decisions within each of these three dimensions (Talukder, 2025). It adds ethical intention, non-harm, and mindful awareness to decision-making. Thus, sustainability becomes a values-led practice that guides strategy, communication, and daily operations (Talukder, 2025).

a. Inner Sustainability: This layer focuses on the ethical and personal dimensions of sustainability. It draws on the Noble Eightfold Path to highlight qualities such as mindfulness, compassion, right intention, and awareness of interdependence. These values shape how people think, act, and make decisions (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Verma, 2019).

b. Outer Sustainability: This layer represents the structural side of sustainability. It includes policies, institutions, business strategies, and measurable outcomes. These elements are often described through the TBL framework of people, planet, and profit.

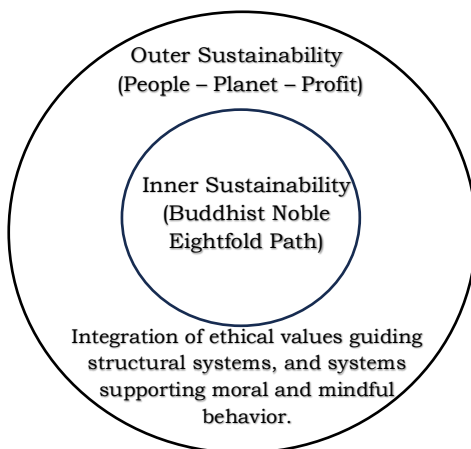


Figure 3. Inner-Outer Sustainability Model

4.2 Interpretation of the Inner–Outer Sustainability Model

The two layers interact dynamically. Inner values influence institutional behaviour, while outer structures shape the conditions that support ethical awareness. Jakobsen (2017) emphasizes that ethics forms the bridge between inner consciousness and external practice, linking personal awareness with social and ecological responsibility. This supports the idea that sustainable transformation begins with moral intention.

a. Inner Sustainability: The Ethical Core

The inner circle represents the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path, which highlights qualities such as Right View (awareness of interdependence) and cause and effects, Right Intention (ethical motivation), Right Action, Right Livelihood and Right Speech (responsible behaviour), Right mindfulness, Right effort and Right concentration (awareness and clarity) (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Verma, 2019).

These principles serve as the ethical ground from which sustainable decisions can emerge. This inner dimension highlights that sustainability is not only about systems and policies; it also begins with how people think, perceive, and relate to others including the environment (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Verma, 2019).

b. Outer Sustainability: Structural Systems

The outer circle represents the Triple Bottom Line (People–Planet–Profit), which focuses on: Social wellbeing, Environmental protection and Economic stability.

This dimension includes policies, institutions, governance structures, business strategies, indicators, and reporting frameworks. These components shape how societies organise resources and respond to crises. While these structures are necessary, they often remain limited or superficial if they are not guided by ethical intention or a deeper sense of responsibility.

c. The Relationship Between Inner and Outer Dimensions

The relationship between the two layers is dynamic. Inner values influence how systems are designed, while systems can reinforce or weaken ethical awareness. When both layers work together, sustainability becomes more stable and meaningful:

Inner values guide outer systems: Ethical awareness can influence how leaders create policies, how businesses design strategies, and how communities engage with sustainability. Without ethical intention, structural tools like the TBL risk becoming symbolic or profit driven (Milne & Gray, 2013; Delmas & Burbano, 2011; Hahn et al., 2014).

Outer systems support inner development: Institutions, education systems, and organisations can encourage mindfulness, fairness, and long-term thinking through their policies and practices. Supportive structures make it easier for people to act in alignment with ethical values. In other words, meaningful sustainability requires inner consciousness and outer systems (Wamsler & Brink, 2018).

Having outlined the general relationship between the inner and outer layers, this subsection details specific mechanisms through which the Eightfold Path can transform TBL practice.

4.3 How the Eightfold Path transforms the TBL (mechanisms)

Integrating the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path transforms the TBL by shifting it from a predominantly measurement- and outcome-oriented framework into a values-guided decision-making system. The TBL continues to structure sustainability around profit, people, and planet, but the Eightfold Path reshapes how decisions are made within each dimension. Ethical intention (Right Intention) reorients sustainability from compliance toward moral responsibility; truthful communication (Right Speech) reduces greenwashing by demanding transparency and honesty; and ethical earning (Right Livelihood) reframes profit as acceptable only when it does not cause social or ecological harm. Systems awareness (Right View) discourages trade-offs that degrade natural capital

by emphasising interdependence and long-term consequences, while sustained commitment (Right Effort and Right Concentration) supports continuous environmental and social improvement beyond short-term initiatives. Together, these mechanisms embed ethical awareness within institutional practice, enabling sustainability outcomes that are more credible, resilient, and aligned with strong sustainability rather than symbolic or short-term performance (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Darlington, 2018; Verma, 2019).

4.4 Conceptual Gap and Original Contribution

Although scholars have increasingly recognised the importance of values, mindsets, and ethical awareness in sustainability, existing models rarely integrate these inner dimensions with the structural tools used in organisational and policy settings (Hahn et al., 2014; Verma, 2019). Despite this growth, Dissanayake et al. (2024) identify a lack of integrative models linking spirituality with organisational sustainability practice, an issue this paper addresses.

This gap is also recognised in UNESCO’s ESD framework, which calls for linking behavioural motivation, values, and inner transformation with institutional governance and strategic planning (UNESCO, 2017). The TBL provides a widely adopted framework for measuring economic, social, and environmental performance, but it does not address the ethical motivations that shape human behaviour (Rambaud & Richard, 2015; Hahn et al., 2014). Even alternative accounting frameworks such as the Triple Depreciation Line (Rambaud & Richard, 2015) focus on capital maintenance and integrated reporting rather than on inner ethical transformation. On the other hand, Buddhist ethics offers a rich foundation for cultivating mindfulness, compassion, and responsible action, yet it lacks a clear connection to institutional sustainability frameworks.

To date, no widely established sustainability framework explicitly integrates the TBL with Buddhist ethical principles in a systematic way (Talukder, 2025). Most previous studies treat

these two areas separately—one focusing on organisational metrics and reporting, and the other on personal transformation or spiritual development (Verma, 2019). As a result, the relationship between inner values and outer systems remains under-theorised.

This paper makes an original contribution by bringing these two perspectives together in a single conceptual model. The Inner–Outer Sustainability Model demonstrates how ethical awareness can guide structural decision-making, and how institutions can create conditions that support mindful and responsible behaviour. This integrative approach fills a clear gap in the literature and offers a more holistic understanding of sustainability one that recognises the importance of both internal motivations and external systems. By combining insights from sustainability studies, Buddhist ethics, ecological economics, and systems thinking, the model introduces a new way of understanding how transformative change can occur at personal, organisational, and societal levels.

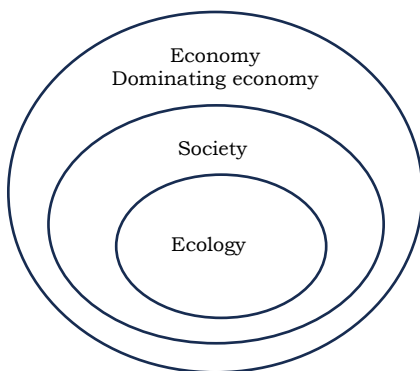


Figure 4a. Weak Sustainability

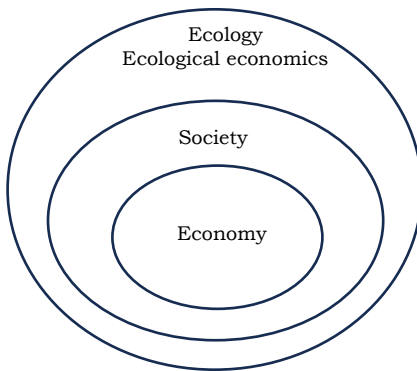


Figure 4b. Strong + Ethically Grounded Sustainability

Source: Jakobsen, 2017

Table 1. *Conceptual comparison matrix*

Weak Sustainability		Strong Sustainability		Proposed Ethically grounded/True Sustainability
Growth		Development		Wellbeing-centred Development
Competition		Cooperation		Co-Creation
Strategy		Partnership Approach		Collective Stewardship
Egocentricity		Eco-centricity		Values-Centric
Economic Man		Ecological Man		Man of Wisdom

Source: Jakobsen, 2017

Interpretation

Weak Sustainability

Economy → Society → Ecology

This places the economy at the top of the hierarchy, followed by society, and finally ecology. The economy is treated as the dominant system that shapes both social and environmental priorities. In this model:

- Economic growth is the central goal.
- Gross Domestic Product (GDP) serves as the main indicator of progress.
- Nature is treated as “natural capital.”
- Environmental problems are addressed through market mechanisms and pricing strategies.

This approach corresponds to what ecological economists describe as weak sustainability. It assumes that natural capital can be substituted by human-made capital and technological innovation. Ecological limits are not treated as strict boundaries but as manageable constraints (Jakobsen, 2017).

Jakobsen argues that such a system generates unintended negative consequences (Jakobsen, 2017). By separating economy from ecology and subordinating social values to market logic, sustainability becomes largely technical and instrumental. Environmental and social concerns are incorporated only when they align with economic profitability.

Strong and Ethically Grounded Sustainability

Ecology → Society → Economy

This diagram reverses the hierarchy. Ecology forms the foundation. Society exists within ecological systems, and the economy operates within society. The economy is not independent but embedded within ecological and social systems. In this model:

- Ecological limits define the boundaries of economic activity.
- Society plays a central role in ensuring justice and cooperation.
- The economy is oriented toward supporting life rather than maximizing profit.
- Development focuses on quality of life rather than quantitative growth.

Jakobsen describes this transition as a move toward circulation economics (Jakobsen, 2017). Cooperation replaces competition as the primary organizing principle. Resilience and long-term stability become more important than short-term efficiency. Economic processes must operate within ecological thresholds. Strong sustainability therefore recognizes that natural systems are not fully substitutable. Ecological limits are real and binding.

Sustainability as a Shift in Worldview

Table 1 complements Figure 4 by summarising how key sustainability dimensions shift across the three models. It

presents sustainability as a gradual transformation of worldview rather than a technical adjustment of economic tools. From a mechanical perspective, reality is understood as a collection of separate parts that can be controlled, optimised, and exploited. Nature is primarily viewed as a resource base for economic production. Society functions to support economic expansion, and public policy is largely guided by growth objectives (Jakobsen, 2017).

Within the mechanical view, economic growth becomes the primary objective. Progress is measured through expansion in production, consumption, and gross domestic product. Competition is treated as the natural organizing principle of markets, and business strategy focuses on gaining advantage over others. Human behaviour is represented through the figure of economic man, who is rational, self-interested, and driven by utility maximization. Sustainability in this context remains superficial. Environmental and social concerns are addressed only when they support profitability or reduce risk. As a result, weak sustainability mainly manages symptoms while leaving the deeper causes of ecological and social crises under-addressed (Jakobsen, 2017).

In contrast, strong sustainability represents a shift toward an organic worldview where reality is seen as interconnected and relational rather than fragmented. The Earth, often referred to as Gaia, is seen as a living and self-organizing system (Jakobsen, 2017).

The economy is understood as embedded within society and nature. Growth is replaced by the idea of development, where quality of life matters more than quantity of output (Jackson, 2009; Jakobsen, 2017). Competition gives way to cooperation, as actors are recognized as interdependent parts of larger systems. Business strategy evolves into a partnership approach that includes stakeholders and long-term responsibility. This shift also transforms the image of the human being.

In the organic model, ecological man replaces economic man who recognizes interdependence and ecological limits. His actions are guided by responsibility toward social and natural systems (Jakobsen, 2017). Strong sustainability thus represents a structural reorientation of economic thought. The economy becomes embedded within society and nature.

Toward True Sustainability

Recognising the distinction between weak and strong sustainability, the proposed framework positions itself as an ethically grounded approach described as “True Sustainability”. While strong sustainability marks significant progress and corrects the structural hierarchy, it may not fully address moral motivation. This study argues that it may remain incomplete if ethical foundations are not fully integrated.

True sustainability extends the strong sustainability perspective further by integrating ethics directly into the organic worldview. This approach redefines development as wellbeing-centred development (Jackson, 2009; Brown & Zsolnai, 2018; Zsolnai, 2008). Wellbeing includes physical health, social belonging, dignity, meaning, and ecological integrity (Brown & Zsolnai, 2018). Economic activity is guided by co-creation rather than mere cooperation. Solutions emerge from shared responsibility, dialogue, and lived practice within communities and ecosystems. Strategy and partnership are transformed into collective stewardship, where actors see themselves as caretakers of shared life-support systems rather than owners or managers (Jakobsen, 2017). The focus shifts from eco-centric awareness alone to a values-centric orientation, where compassion, moderation, fairness, and responsibility guide decision-making from within.

At the centre of this ethically grounded model stands the image of the “Man of Wisdom”, an ideal-type actor guided by ethical judgement and responsibility. This human image transcends both economic man and ecological man. The man of wisdom

integrates rational thinking with ethical judgment, emotional awareness, and spiritual insight. He recognizes limits and chooses moderation willingly. His actions are guided not by calculation alone but by wisdom rooted in concern for present and future life. This study also argues that values-based sustainability becomes possible only when such an ethical and conscious transformation occurs simultaneously at the level of worldview, economic system, business practice, and individual development (Bodhi, 2010; Verma, 2019; Zsolnai, 2008; Rachels & Rachels, 2019).

True sustainability therefore involves both structural change and ethical transformation. It connects inner consciousness with outer systems, and it integrates ecology, society, economy, and moral responsibility into a coherent whole.

5. Case Perspectives: Bhutan and Patagonia as Central Cases

Bhutan and Patagonia are chosen as the two central cases because they illustrate how sustainability can be guided by values that are closely aligned with Buddhist ethics. By contrast, the Nordic region is included as a comparative context. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness approach puts wellbeing, culture, and ecological care at the centre of national planning. This connects strongly to the TBL because it prioritises people and the planet, not only economic output (Karma Ura et al., 2012). Patagonia is selected because it adopts a similar values-led approach. The company has strengthened its sustainability performance in economic, social and environmental dimension through long-term thinking, responsible production, and purpose-driven leadership (Talukder, 2025).

On the other hand, the Nordic region is chosen because its welfare model is built on social protection, equality, and high trust in public institutions. It also has strong sustainability focus and governance systems. This makes Nordic states a useful comparative case to explore how a largely western secular welfare state can support TBL outcomes, and how this

may differ from Bhutan's more explicitly values- and wellbeing-based approach.

5.1 Bhutan (Inner-Outer Model)

Bhutan structures its national policies around wellbeing, cultural resilience, and ecological care (Karma Ura et al., 2012; Darlington, 2018). This aligns well with the TBL, because it focuses on people and the planet instead of only profit. GNH is an example of how inner values can guide outer systems and help a country set priorities that go beyond economic growth. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and Education Sector Program Implementation Grant (ESPIG) reforms in Bhutan show how values-driven governance is translated into institutional design. For example, Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) access is planned to expand from 21.8% to 34% of 3–5-year-olds by prioritising remote and disadvantaged communities, demonstrating how ethical commitments to equity become operational goals (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2018–2021, p. 31). Therefore, Bhutan's GNH shows how national policy can prioritise people and planet alongside economic stability, which mirrors the TBL logic, but grounded in explicit cultural values such as wellbeing and responsibility (Karma Ura et al., 2012).



Figure 5. The nine domains and 33 indicators of the GNH index
Source: Ura et al. (2012).

Bhutan's GNH Index is not only conceptual but operationalised through an Alkire–Foster multidimensional measurement system with 9 domains, 33 indicators, and 124 variables. The 2010 GNH score was 0.743, with ~40.8% of Bhutanese classified as “happy” and the remaining “not-yet-happy” achieving sufficiency in ~56.6% of indicators. This demonstrates a measurable link between ethical values and development policy. However, sufficiency remains uneven e.g., housing (46.2%), political participation (~43.6% deprived), and services (41%), which shows that values-based governance must be supported by structural capacity to meet the TBL-aligned outcomes. Thus, Bhutan illustrates the argument that contemplative values can guide outer systems, while also illustrating the practical limits and implementation challenges of ethically grounded sustainability (Karma Ura et al., 2012; Darlington, 2018).

5.2 Patagonia (Inner-Outer Model)

Patagonia demonstrates how values-driven leadership can guide corporate sustainability. Its initiatives such as encouraging product repair and promoting responsible consumption demonstrate how organisational purpose and ethical intention can shape business practices and long-term strategy (Talukder, 2025; Chouinard, 2016; Chouinard & Stanley, 2012). The company offers an example of how inner motivations within leadership can inform outer systems such as supply chains and marketing. Patagonia operationalises these commitments through initiatives such as Fair-Trade Certified supply chains, the Worn Wear repair programme, and its long-term partnership with 1% for the Planet, which reinvests profit into ecological stewardship (Chouinard, 2016; Brown & Zsolnai, 2018). These practices show how values can guide structural business decisions in production, marketing, and post-consumption phases.

An organic economy is described as one rooted in cooperation and partnership rather than competition (Jakobsen, 2017, pp. 232–233). This view is reflected in Patagonia's collaborative

supply chain model, which integrates ecological responsibility with ethical leadership (Talukder, 2025).

Patagonia illustrates how the Eightfold Path strengthens the TBL in practice by shaping how profit is earned (Right Livelihood), how claims are communicated (Right Speech), and how environmental goals are pursued with long-term discipline (Right Effort and Right Concentration) (Talukder, 2025; Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Darlington, 2018). However, Patagonia also demonstrates the practical tensions of working within global market structures. The company still operates in international supply chains and must balance growth with ecological limits. This indicates that even values-driven firms face contradictions between purpose and economic pressures (Talukder, 2025). These dynamics indicate that ethical alignment is a continuous process rather than a fixed achievement (Talukder, 2025). This nuanced perspective strengthens the argument that true sustainability requires both inner ethical commitment and supportive structural conditions.

It is important to note that Patagonia is not a Buddhist organisation; rather, its values and practices show parallels with Buddhist ethics such as livelihood, responsibility, and interdependence (Brown & Zsolnai, 2018). These parallels make Patagonia a useful case to illustrate how the Noble Eightfold Path can strengthen the TBL-based sustainability in practice without requiring religious foundations.

5.3 Norway and the Nordic Region

The Nordic welfare model highlights the role of shared social norms such as trust, equality, and civic responsibility in supporting structural sustainability policies (Kettunen, 2025; Sachs, 2015). Although secular, the Nordic welfare model shows how ethical commitments can influence welfare systems and social cooperation (Kettunen, 2025; Sachs, 2015). Building on this, recent work also links Nordic welfare traditions to environmental and sustainability governance, illustrating how values-based frameworks can operate in non-Buddhist contexts (Sachs, 2015). Together, these cases show how

different societies and institutions integrate inner values with structural policies. They help illustrate how the Inner–Outer Sustainability Model can be applied in diverse cultural and organisational settings.

The Nordic welfare context shows how social trust and fairness can strengthen the “People” side of the TBL, and how institutions can support long-term sustainability through stable governance rather than short-term market pressure (Kettunen, 2025; Talukder, 2025).

Kettunen (2025) explains that, since the 1980s, the link between Nordic cooperation and welfare policy has weakened. The term *Nordic model* is now often used as a national brand in global competitiveness debates. Welfare narratives shift between nostalgia for past welfare ideals and a new focus on competitiveness. This creates a tension. It shows that structural sustainability can be reduced to rhetoric if it is not supported by ethical awareness. In this way, the Nordic example supports the argument of this paper: inner values must guide outer systems, or sustainability risks becoming superficial branding rather than real practice (Kettunen, 2025).

6. Discussion

Building on the East–West perspectives outlined in Section 2.5, this discussion examines how these ideas become more relevant when applied through the Inner–Outer Model.

Studies show that the Eightfold Path is linked to the TBL in a structured way (Talukder, 2025). The ‘Profit’ component is strengthened through Right Livelihood and Right Action because they guide ethical earning and ethical conduct. Right Livelihood can change how profit is pursued by rejecting harmful industries and supporting fair trade and living wages. Right Action can push firms away from corruption, exploitation, and destructive sourcing.

The ‘People’ dimension is reinforced through Right Intention, Right Speech, and Right Mindfulness, which support ethical

leadership, truthful communication, and stakeholder wellbeing. For instance, Right Speech can reduce greenwashing because it promotes truthful sustainability claims and transparent reporting. The 'Planet' component is strengthened through Right View, Right Effort, and Right Concentration, because they build long-term ecological vision, continuous improvement, and sustained commitment. They support long-term environmental work; therefore, sustainability is not a short-term initiative but an ongoing organisational priority (Talukder, 2025).

6.1 Right View and the Reorientation of Sustainability Thinking

Right View encourages an understanding of the world that recognises impermanence, interdependence, and the moral consequences of actions, thereby supporting a more ethically grounded application of the TBL. These ideas can influence how leaders and institutions think about sustainability. When decision-makers see how economic, social, and environmental outcomes are connected, they may become more aware of long-term impacts and potential harm (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009).

This perspective challenges the assumption that continuous consumption leads to wellbeing. Right View also questions the assumption of limitless economic growth (Jackson, 2009). By highlighting the links between human wellbeing, ecological stability, and economic systems, Right View helps shift sustainability from a narrow performance measure to a broader, values-informed responsibility (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009). It encourages decisions that support long-term ecological health and social fairness without relying on moral pressure or prescriptive rules. The organic world view as described by Jakobsen (2017) is much like the Buddhist idea of Right View. Both invite people to step back, see the bigger picture, and imagine kinder and more balanced ways of living.

6.2 Dependent Origination and Systemic Awareness

Dependent Origination teaches that all phenomena arise through interconnected causes and conditions (Hanh, 2009;

Brown, 2004; Verma, 2019). This view aligns closely with systems thinking, which also highlights relationships and feedback loops within social and ecological systems (Meadows, 2008).

Understanding these connections can help policymakers move beyond short-term or isolated solutions. For example, climate change is not only a matter of emissions but also reflects broader patterns of consumption, economic structures, and cultural expectations. Recognising interdependence encourages approaches that address underlying causes rather than symptoms. It can also support cooperation, since interconnected systems require shared responsibility across sectors and communities.

6.3 Ethical Transformation and Karmic Responsibility

In Buddhism, karma refers to the idea that actions have consequences that unfold over time (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009). Applied to sustainability, this perspective highlights that political, economic, and industrial decisions shape future social and ecological conditions.

Seeing sustainability through the lens of ethical causality can strengthen moral awareness in decision-making. It suggests that corporate actions such as production choices, sourcing, or marketing carry long-term effects that extend beyond immediate profit or strategic advantage. This does not replace formal sustainability metrics, but it offers a complementary ethical dimension that can help deepen responsibility and reframe corporate and policy choices.

6.4 Toward a More Balanced Sustainability Approach

Integrating Right View with the TBL supports a two-level understanding of sustainability.

- The outer level focuses on systems, structures, and measurable results.
- The inner level emphasises ethics, awareness, and intention.

Together, these levels help explain why technical solutions alone often do not lead to meaningful transformation. When leaders understand interdependence and the impacts of their choices, they are more likely to support policies and practices that reflect ecological care, fairness, and long-term thinking.

This balanced view also helps link personal development with institutional change. Systems that encourage reflection, empathy, and responsibility can create environments where sustainability becomes more than compliance - it becomes a shared orientation for decision-making. In this way, the integrated model offers a pathway for connecting external progress with inner awareness without assuming that ethical change automatically leads to structural reform.

7. Theoretical and Practical Implications of East-West Integration

7.1 Theoretical Implications

The Inner-Outer Sustainability Model contributes to sustainability theory by linking ethical awareness with structural governance. It brings together Western frameworks such as the TBL and systems thinking with Buddhist principles that emphasise intention, balance, and interdependence. This model helps explain why external reforms often fall short when values and motivations are not addressed.

7.2 Practical Implications

The practical implications of the Model are informed by the different roles played by the two central cases, Bhutan and Patagonia and the comparative Nordic welfare context. These cases help show how the model can be applied across policy, business, education, and everyday life. It suggests that policies may be more effective when they integrate wellbeing, fairness, and long-term thinking. For example, Bhutan designs national policies using the Gross National Happiness framework. Instead of focusing only on GDP, the government measures wellbeing, cultural vitality, and ecological resilience (Karma

Ura et al., 2012). Its education reforms under the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) Education Sector Program Implementation Grant (ESPIG) programme prioritised access to Early Childhood Care and Development in remote and disadvantaged areas (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2018–2021).

This shows fairness because vulnerable communities are prioritised. It reflects long-term thinking because early childhood education strengthens future social development. It promotes wellbeing because children’s development is treated as a national priority. This illustrates how integrating wellbeing, fairness, and long-term thinking can strengthen policy effectiveness.

In business, values-driven leadership and transparent communication can strengthen sustainability strategies. In education, combining ethics with systems thinking may help develop future leaders who can navigate complex social and environmental challenges. For instance, Bhutan links education with Gross National Happiness values. Schools are encouraged to teach not only academic skills, but also compassion, responsibility, and environmental care (Karma Ura et al., 2012).

At the same time, the education reforms include structured assessment systems such as the National Education Assessment Framework (Ministry of Education Bhutan, 2018–2021).

This means students learn:

- Ethical values (ethics)
- How social, economic, and environmental systems are connected (systems thinking)

Such education helps future leaders understand that economic decisions affect communities and nature. It prepares them to make balanced and responsible choices.

a) Policy and Governance

The Inner–Outer Sustainability Model suggests that effective policies benefit from both structural planning and attention to values. Governments can strengthen sustainability by combining measurable goals with ethical considerations such as wellbeing, fairness, and social cohesion (Brown & Zsolnai, 2018). Examples include Bhutan’s GNH framework and the emerging wellbeing economy initiatives in Nordic countries, which show how moral or cultural values can guide national development strategies (Brooks, 2013; Jackson, 2009; Sachs, 2015).

In the Nordic context, long-term welfare state development has similarly been rooted in ideas of social responsibility and equality, even as the ‘Nordic model’ has later been reframed in terms of competitiveness and branding (Kettunen, 2025). Using this approach, policymakers can design strategies that address material needs while also encouraging reflection, responsibility, and long-term thinking, adding a complementary dimension to traditional policy tools.

b) Business and Corporate Ethics

The integrated model can be used as a decision-making heuristic. When a firm makes a sustainability decision, it should ask two questions. First, does this decision improve Profit–People–Planet in a real way? Second, does it follow the ethical direction of the Eightfold Path, especially non-harm, truthful communication, and responsible consumption and livelihood? If either criterion is not satisfied, the decision is difficult to regard as genuinely sustainable and requires reconsideration (Talukder, 2025).

For businesses, the model highlights the benefit of integrating ethical reflection with sustainability practices. Climate adaptation research shows that mindfulness relates to pro-social and pro-environmental action (Wamsler & Brink, 2018). Mindfulness-based approaches, value-driven leadership, and

transparent communication can support healthier organisational cultures (Talukder, 2025; Kudesia, 2019). These practices may help leaders make decisions that align environmental responsibility with long-term business stability.

The model also suggests that companies can enhance their sustainability efforts by linking structural tools such as reporting frameworks or life-cycle assessments with inner dimensions such as purpose, intention, and moral awareness (Rambaud & Richard, 2015). This combination may help reduce the gap between stated values and actual behaviour.

c) Education and Ethical Leadership

Education plays a central role in shaping future leaders. When curricula include ethics, systems thinking, and contemplative practices, students can develop the capacity to reflect on their actions and understand how their decisions affect broader systems (Ministry of Education and Skills Development, 2025). UNESCO (2017) explicitly connects ethical formation with educational outcomes through its three learning dimensions: cognitive knowledge, socio-emotional development, and behavioural action. This directly supports the Inner–Outer Sustainability Model proposed in this paper.

The integrated model supports the idea that leadership development benefits from both technical knowledge and personal insight. Research on mindfulness and climate adaptation suggests that mindfulness has broader implications for how people respond to sustainability challenges (Wamsler & Brink, 2018). Therefore, programmes that combine mindfulness, ethical reasoning, and sustainability literacy may prepare learners to address complex challenges in a thoughtful and responsible manner (Wamsler & Brink, 2018).

d) Personal Behaviour and Everyday Practice

Ims and Jakobsen (2015 as cited in Jakobsen, 2017, p.239-40) distinguish between shallow and deep authenticity. Deep

authenticity reflects an eco-centric awareness rooted in interdependence, paralleling the Buddhist cultivation of mindfulness and compassion (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009).

The integrated model has implications for individual behaviour. Mindfulness, compassion, and awareness of interdependence can support simpler and more intentional lifestyles. These qualities may encourage more responsible forms of consumption and a greater sense of connection with other people and the natural world (Wamsler & Brink, 2018; Brown & Zsolnai, 2018; Kudesia, 2019; Zsolnai, 2008). At a cognitive level, Kudesia (2019) describes mindfulness as a metacognitive capacity that helps individuals notice and adjust habitual patterns of thought and response, which can support behavioural and lifestyle changes. This does not imply that individuals alone can solve sustainability challenges, but it suggests that personal awareness can reinforce broader structural efforts and contribute to cultural change.

8. Future Research

While this paper presents a conceptual model, further research is needed to understand how inner and outer dimensions interact in real-world contexts. Three areas appear especially promising:

8.1. Policy and Public Administration in Bhutan and Norway

Comparative case studies could examine how ethical or contemplative values are reflected in policy processes, institutional culture, and administrative decision-making. These studies may provide insight into how values-based governance operates in both Buddhist and secular settings.

8.2. Organisational Leadership and Corporate Practices

Empirical work within companies could explore how mindfulness, purpose-driven leadership, or ethical intention influence sustainability outcomes. Interviews and organisational ethnographies may help identify the conditions

under which inner awareness supports or fails to support structural change.

8.3. Education and Learning Environments

Research in schools or teacher education programmes could investigate how contemplative and ethical practices shape attitudes toward sustainability. This is particularly in contexts where national education policy explicitly links learning with GNH, wellbeing, and sustainability (MoESD, 2025). This work could include classroom observations, curriculum analysis, or experimental designs that assess the effects of mindfulness-based approaches.

Future studies can also test the Inner–Outer Sustainability Model in different cultural, economic, and institutional settings (Wamsler & Brink, 2018). Doing so may help refine the model and clarify the pathways through which inner transformation and structural reform influence one another.

9. Limitations and Critical Perspectives

While integrating Buddhist ethics with Western sustainability frameworks offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge several limitations. First, Buddhist principles may not translate uniformly across cultures or institutional settings. Concepts such as mindfulness, compassion, and non-harm often emerge from specific historical and cultural contexts. When applied in organisational or policy environments, these ideas may be interpreted in different ways or lose some of their original meaning.

Second, there is a risk of romanticizing Eastern philosophies. Sustainability literature sometimes presents Buddhist ethics as inherently harmonious or morally superior, which can overlook internal debates, diversity within Buddhist traditions, and the practical difficulties of applying spiritual concepts in complex social systems. Treating Buddhist ethics as a simple solution may lead to unrealistic expectations about its transformative capacity.

Third, spiritual or contemplative frameworks can be difficult to operationalise. While values such as awareness or ethical intention are important, they are not easily measured, monitored, or incorporated into formal governance systems. This can create challenges for policymakers and organisations that rely on clear indicators and accountability structures. Without careful design, such frameworks may remain symbolic or peripheral.

Recognizing these limitations strengthens the argument for an integrated model. It highlights the need for balance: ethical awareness can enrich sustainability thinking, but it must be supported by practical systems, institutional capacities, and culturally sensitive approaches. This critical perspective ensures that the proposed framework is grounded, realistic, and open to further refinement.

10. Conclusion

This paper has explored how ethically grounded sustainability can be enhanced by bringing together the structural focus of Western frameworks and the Buddhist ethics. The Inner–Outer Sustainability Model shows that lasting change requires both external systems and inner values (Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Verma, 2019). Structural reforms alone cannot address the deeper motivations that shape behaviour, while ethical awareness needs supportive institutions to create meaningful impact (Jakobsen, 2017; Verma, 2019).

Examples from the central cases of Bhutan and Patagonia, together with the Nordic states as a comparative context, demonstrate that it is possible to align organisational or national systems with ethical intentions (Karma Ura et al., 2012; Kettunen, 2025; Sachs, 2015; Talukder, 2025). These cases show that when leaders and communities act with mindfulness, compassion, and a long-term perspective, sustainability becomes more genuine and effective. They also illustrate that values-based approaches can take different cultural forms, yet still support shared goals such as fairness,

ecological care, and human wellbeing (Jakobsen, 2017; Bodhi, 2010; Hanh, 2009; Darlington, 2018).

The East–West synthesis outlined in this paper highlights a pathway beyond the limits of conventional sustainability thinking. It responds to the challenges of materialism, short-termism, and disconnection from nature by emphasising interdependence and moral responsibility. This approach encourages individuals, organisations, and governments to consider not only what they do, but also why they do it (Wamsler & Brink, 2018). This reflects UNESCO’s definition of education for sustainable development as a process that cultivates both the inner capacities and the structural competencies required for societal transformation (UNESCO, 2017).

The model presented here offers a foundation for future empirical research. Studies in Bhutan, Norway, and other contexts could examine how contemplative values appear in policy processes, leadership practices, and educational systems. Such research would help clarify how inner and outer dimensions interact in real-world settings and how this integration can support more resilient and compassionate societies.

Overall, this paper argues that ethically grounded sustainability requires a balance between inner transformation and outer reform. When ethical awareness and institutional practice work together, sustainability becomes not only achievable but also deeply meaningful, guiding societies toward a more peaceful, responsible, and ecologically balanced future (Zsolnai, 2008; Rachels & Rachels, 2019; Brown & Zsolnai, 2018).

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