

## Changing a Habit for a Healthier Earth

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation  
Monday, 26 July 2010 16:20

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In our times, we face a very difficult challenge: our planet is running a fever and global warming is bringing about extreme weather that causes devastating disasters. People around the world are gradually becoming aware of the seriousness of this problem, and discussions are beginning to happen in the halls of science, government, and industry. Yet there is something that every one of us ordinary citizens can do ourselves, and it is very simple—become vegetarian. Scientists have confirmed that just by changing to a vegetarian diet, we can significantly lower carbon emissions. This would go a long way to help protect the environment and mitigate global warming. In the past, I encouraged people to eat vegetarian, but I left it as just a choice I hope people could make. But the situation is now no longer the same. Our planet is in peril, and there is great urgency to do what we can to care for it, or at the very least, not harm it. Becoming vegetarian is a significant start.

When we think of the food we like, it seems hard to give up meat. But little children in our kindergarten in Malaysia, upon learning about the merits of a meat-free diet, gave it up and became vegetarian. Why is it so easy for them and yet so hard for us adults? It's because children's hearts are very pure, so they can quickly grasp the truth that animals, like us, feel pain and do not wish to be killed. Indeed, the Buddha tells us that all living creatures have the Buddha-nature. Animals have feelings, and they too experience fear and pain. They have their families and loved ones and wish very much to live. When they are about to be killed, they too cry out in terror for help.

There is a true story about this, chronicled by Dharma Master Lian Chi. In nineteenth century China, there was a wealthy family in which the husband was a devout Buddhist. He was a generous philanthropist and a longtime vegetarian. His wife, however, was very fond of meat and fine cuisine. One year, for her birthday, she wanted to have a sumptuous meal to celebrate. Her servants purchased a live pig, goat, chicken, duck, and fish for the occasion. When her husband learned of this, he tried to dissuade her and asked her to spare the lives of these animals. She refused. It was her birthday and she wanted to celebrate.

The night before her birthday, she had a dream. In the dream, she entered the kitchen of her home, where the cook and servants were making preparations for her birthday feast. They were just about to slaughter the animals. The animals were wailing. The cook was standing ready, holding a knife in his hand. There was a pig bound by the legs, and it was struggling hard and squealing loudly. Suddenly, she felt her soul enter the body of the pig.

Looking up, she saw the cook and the knife approaching her. She struggled furiously and cried out with all her might. But, it was to no avail. She felt the knife stab into her throat. The pain was excruciating. While she was bleeding, hot water was poured over her body to scald away the hair on it. Then the knife cut open her body from the throat down to the abdomen. The pain was immense.

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Her eyes fell on the goat, and suddenly, her soul left the body of the pig and entered that of the goat. As the cook slaughtered the goat, she again experienced the knife slicing and cutting up her body. The pain was beyond words. Next were the chicken and duck. As before, her soul entered their bodies and she experienced being killed.

When the cook was done slaughtering all the animals, an old servant brought in a live fish. One of the maids enthusiastically cried out, "Our mistress loves to eat fish. Cook, quickly make fish balls out of it and serve them for breakfast." With that, the cook started scraping off the fish's scales while it was still alive. By this time, the wife's soul had also entered the body of the fish. She experienced the scales being ripped off of her, and it was extremely painful. As she was experiencing all of this, she saw her maid standing by, talking and laughing, oblivious to the pain and killing of these animals.

While in the bodies of these animals, the rich man's wife cried out for help, but her cries went unheard. The cook and servants joyfully went about their tasks, filled with excitement for the special occasion and the feast that would be held. They were blind to the pain and terror of the animals. But, living all of this while in the bodies of the animals, the wife experienced it all. Then, suddenly, she came to herself and awoke from the dream.

Upon waking, the wife was in a lot of pain. She felt as if her body had been sliced, cut, boiled, and fried. It was torture.

The next morning, the maid brought in a dish of fish balls for breakfast. When the wife saw it, she was filled with fright and told the maid, "Take the dish away immediately. I'm in a lot of suffering." Her uncharacteristic response puzzled the maid. Thinking she must be ill, the maid quickly went to inform her master of the mistress' condition.

When the husband went to see his wife, she told him about the dream she had had. "I experienced the most excruciating suffering. It was like hell. The pain, torment, and misery were unbearable. I now know what it is like for the animals, and I want to repent." From that day forth, she was a vegetarian.

In fact, most of us eat meat because it is just the way we have always eaten—we do not think much about it and do not connect the meat on our plates to a living creature that was killed for our sake. But when we begin to see the animals for the living creatures that they are, our humanity, our empathy, and our compassion will be touched. Everything then becomes very simple—that is why children can so easily understand and become vegetarians.

We human beings share this planet with other living creatures. How can we objectify them as food for our consumption, for us to slaughter at will? Life is precious. Just as the lives of human beings are precious, so are those of all living creatures. Such an understanding is wisdom as well as love. When our hearts open with this understanding, we will not have the heart to hurt other creatures, and our hearts will well up with a reverence for all life. For they, like us, are living beings. And for them as well as for us, this planet Earth is home.

From Dharma Master Cheng Yen's Talks

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