

Caring for Our Planet, Our Home

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Saturday, 25 August 2012 15:53

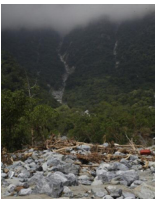


[[Master's Teachings](#)]

"As inhabitants of the earth, we are nourished and sustained by Mother Earth who provides us our food and all the resources for life. If she is healthy and well, we will be healthy and well. Our fates are intertwined." —Dharma Master Cheng Yen

In Malaysia there's a family of four who, for over 30 years, used to run a noodle shop selling meat noodles. They turned to vegetarianism and switched to selling vegetarian food, despite a decline of earnings as well as customers. In Taiwan, a volunteer who was running a very lucrative business selling disposable tableware closed it down, forgoing the profit. What made these people change?

These are people who love the environment and Mother Nature. They're making adjustments to their lives so they can better protect the Earth. This is because they understand how our life is connected to Mother Nature and how our daily lifestyle impacts the environment—something that Dharma Master Cheng Yen often tells us. Below is a summary of the connections and impacts that Dharma Master Cheng Yen has spoken about, which can open our eyes to why it is important to care for our planet, our home.



Beautiful planet undergoing destruction

Our Earth is a very beautiful planet. Among all the planets in the universe, the Earth is the loveliest, with mountains, oceans, and all manner of environments, each a home to many kinds of creatures. Mother Earth sustains all life on it, including us humans. She provides all the food we eat and the material goods we use.

But her health is declining and she's losing her ability to protect and provide for the creatures living on the land. Natural disasters, such as floods, mudslides, wildfires, drought, and earthquakes, cause damage to the Earth. Crops are destroyed as a result of drought or flooding, leading to food shortages and famine. People lose their lives and their homes as a result of natural disasters. Mother Nature can no longer provide a safe environment for us to live in.

Global warming is causing natural disasters to happen more frequently. The rising of the Earth's temperature has disrupted the order of Nature, resulting in abnormal climates and natural disasters. The increasing global temperature is caused by greenhouse gases in the atmosphere trapping the Earth's heat. Despite the call by the United Nations to industrialized

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nations to cut down on their greenhouse gas emissions, in the past few years, we've seen a continued increase of greenhouse gases. If this goes on, our planet will continue undergoing destruction, jeopardizing the lives of all creatures, including us humans.



What can we do to help?

Did you know that eating meat contributes to over half of the greenhouse gases? World Watch Institute has reported that 51% of greenhouse gases are attributed to livestock and their byproducts¹. If we can cut down on our meat consumption, we can help reduce the problem. Mother Earth supports a very large human population of seven billion. Imagine how much food we have to eat every day. For example, a whole chicken can be eaten in just one meal, but it takes months to raise. Imagine how many animals need to be raised in order to feed people. Raising animals, such as chickens, pigs, and cows, produces wastes, such as excrement and methane gas. Scientific research has found that methane is much more potent in warming our planet than carbon dioxide. Due to the increase in human population, meat consumption has increased five-fold in the past 50 years, and so, the amount of greenhouse gases has also greatly increased. This is why scientists are telling us that the quickest way to mitigate global warming is to eat vegetarian.

Eating Vegetarian

For a long time, Dharma Master Cheng Yen has been urging people to eat vegetarian. By not eating meat, it helps nurture kindness and compassion in our heart, as we don't take the lives of animals. Vegetarian food is also good for our health. And now scientists are telling us that eating vegetarian can save the Earth. By eating vegetarian, our demand for meat will decrease. Hence, farms won't need to raise so many livestock. When the number of livestock is reduced, greenhouse gases associated with raising animals will also reduce. Therefore, to help our planet and the whole of mankind, it's necessary that we eat vegetarian and encourage other people to do it too.



The family in Malaysia that turned vegetarian and stopped selling beef noodles did so after watching Da Ai TV, Tzu Chi's TV channel. It broadcasts many programs on environmental protection, vegetarianism, and protecting the life of animals. Through Da Ai TV, they learned the harm of killing animals, eating meat, and its negative impact on the environment. So they turned to eating vegetarian and courageously made the switch to selling vegetarian food even though it hurt their business. But they insist on doing it because it gives them peace of mind in knowing that they're no longer doing harm to the animals and the Earth.

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Here is another example. There are two Tzu Chi volunteers who became vegetarian after taking part in [the sutra adaptation of the Water Repentance Text](#) last year. This was an activity Tzu Chi held last year which required participants to eat vegetarian for at least 108 days. The two Tzu Chi volunteers who participated were husband and wife. The husband was very keen on eating vegetarian, but the wife was very resistant to it. Despite her objection, he took the initiative to eat vegetarian anyway. To get his wife to follow suit, he went to learn vegetarian cooking and started cooking for her every day so that she would not have any chance to cook and eat meat. The wife, meanwhile, was learning about the harm of eating meat through the sutra adaptation activity and has become repentant of eating meat and the harms she has done to animals. After much struggle to overcome her initial resistance, she finally became a vegetarian. Now, the whole family, including the children, is vegetarian.

It's not hard to eat vegetarian. Once we make the switch and get used to our new eating habit, it can go a long way toward protecting our environment and caring for the Earth.



Human consumption, the burden of Mother Earth

Cars, computers, houses, and clothing, are some of the things that we use every day. We drive around in a car to get us to where we need to go. We use computers for work. We live in a house to shelter us from the elements, and we have to wear clothes every day. All these require natural resources: fuels for the car, various metals for computer parts, brick or concrete for houses, and synthetic fibers for cloth. The Earth provides the resources for us to transform into these various material goods. With our growing population, she's trying very hard to support us. There's only one Earth and her resources are limited. Inasmuch as she tries to provide us what we need, her resources are dwindling. The Earth is also becoming more and more polluted.

Take oil or petroleum for example. Our demand for oil keeps on increasing, so we keep pumping it out of the earth. The process of refining oil and then making products derived from oil, such as synthetic fibers, releases a lot of pollutants into the atmosphere, land, and water.

The houses we live in also come at the expense of pollution. Many houses are made from bricks and concrete. To make bricks and concrete, we mine for clay and various types of rocks. The process of making them involves very hot kilns which produce air pollution. After excavating clay and rocks, we leave permanent tunnels or holes in the mountains. The mountains cannot regrow, so the tunnels won't fill themselves again with the same clay or rocks that were excavated. It's the same with metals, such as gold, iron, and copper. Metals ores excavated from the earth are processed to obtain these metals. During the process, toxic waste is generated.

Many of the material goods that we enjoy in our daily life come at the expense of environmental

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damage and pollution. As the human population grows, the demand for resources becomes greater, and we also create more pollution. If we continue with our current lifestyle of consumption, and continue over-extracting materials, the Earth's resources will be depleted within 30 years². If we deplete all the available resources now, we won't have resources left for our children or our future generations to use.

Developing a Heart of Appreciation and Recycling

The Earth provides so much to us, from food and housing to all the material goods that we use. How can we help her and minimize the harms we're doing to her? One very tangible way that Dharma Master Cheng Yen tells us we can help is by doing recycling. By recycling what we would otherwise simply throw out with the garbage, we can reduce the need to extract new raw materials from the Earth and better protect the Earth from being damaged. When recyclable materials are sorted by type, they can serve as raw materials to be remade into new products.



In many countries, Tzu Chi has recycling programs to educate people about environmental protection and encourage them do recycling by saving items such as cans, plastic bottles, and cartons, and keeping them clean. By keeping the recyclables clean and already sorted, it makes the recycling easier for volunteers and also saves water in cleaning.

In the programs, we share with people how to develop a heart of appreciation when using things in our daily life through cherishing what we have. Take drinking juice for example. When we hold a bottle of juice in our hand, let's think about how much labor and effort went into producing it. First, farmers need to grow fruit trees, and they need to take care of them by applying fertilizers and tending to them. Mother Nature, with her sunlight, water, soil, and air, makes the trees grow and produce fruits. When the fruits are ripe, workers harvest and process them. Drivers then transport the juices to the supermarket to be put on the shelves. So much effort went in so that we may enjoy the juice, we should be grateful and appreciate it.

After we finish drinking, there'll be some drops left at the bottom of the container. To cherish those drops of juice, we can pour some water in it, shake it a little bit to rinse the few drops, and drink the liquid. That way, we won't waste any drops of juice that so many people worked hard to provide. Also, by rinsing the container with water, it keeps the container clean so that it won't attract ants, flies, or cockroaches to our home. We can do this not just for juice containers, but for milk cartons and other things that can be recycled.

When the recyclables are brought to the recycling stations, our recycling volunteers sort them by their material type. If the recyclables are dirty, they have to be cleaned before being sorted. Take a PET bottle for example, the volunteers separate the cap and its plastic ring from the bottle, then take off the label wrapping, leaving the bottle as clean and free from impurities as possible. By keeping the recyclables clean and sorting them in detail, they can be turned into high quality products. For example, recycled PET bottles can be turned into fabrics, which are

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then made into clothing and blankets. It takes 70 PET bottles to make one blanket. We then distribute these blankets to people in need around the world, such as disaster survivors and the poor. Instead of obtaining raw materials to make the blankets, through recycling, we are able to turn "garbage" into valuable resources and reuse them to make useful products for people.

Many residents in the community take part in our recycling effort. When they participate and personally get involved in doing recycling, they see for themselves firsthand how much waste we generate, how many things we throw away, and how much we are consuming.

Mr. Chen is a recycling volunteer in Taiwan who used to run a wholesale business providing disposable tableware and plastic bags. In 1990, there was an increase in demand for disposable tableware in Taiwan due to people using it to prevent contracting hepatitis B when eating out. Mr. Chen's business bloomed.

Later he came into contact with Tzu Chi and got involved in recycling work. He would help transport recyclables to the recycling station and sort them out. After doing this, he came to realize that the disposable tableware his business provided end up in the garbage after use. As Tzu Chi was promoting environmental protection by cutting down on the use of disposables, his business was doing the exact opposite. He felt very bad.

As he still needed to support his family and it was hard for him to switch, he continued to run the business. Many years later, in 1997, when his financial situation became more stable, he finally was able to fulfill his wish to close his disposable tableware business of 26 years. Knowing how important recycling is to protecting the Earth, he helped set up a recycling station in his community five years later and worked there every day.

Many people who volunteer at the recycling stations have similar experiences to Mr. Chen. After participating in recycling work, they come to examine their lifestyle, begin to cut down on their consumption, and buy only the things they need. They also cherish material goods by using them for as long as possible instead of pursuing the latest fashion by throwing things out and replacing them with a newer model. They come to appreciate the goods they're using and appreciate the Earth for providing them with the materials that make their life comfortable. They become more aware of the need to protect the environment and take actions to protect it.

Since Tzu Chi started its recycling work in 1990, many people have joined our effort in protecting the environment. As of 2011, we have over 100,000 recycling volunteers in 15 countries and regions working to protect the environment.



Conserving Water and Electricity

In addition to recycling to conserve resources, we can also cherish other resources, such as water and electricity.

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With the damage done to the environment, Nature's capacity to retain water is becoming diminished. Water isn't going into rivers and many are drying up. When it doesn't rain, we may face a water crisis. Though many people have turned to using groundwater, over-pumping of groundwater has already caused land to sink. As there are so many people who need to use water in this world and water resources are limited, if every one of us can use less water, the limited water resources can last longer.

There's one volunteer who did just this. In her home, she keeps many basins and buckets, which she uses to collect used water. She saves the water from washing vegetables and reuses it to water plants. She also saves the cleaner, non-soapy water from the shower and uses it again to flush the toilet and mop the floor. When it rains, she collects rain water and uses it to do everyday jobs too. By doing this she is able to cut down water consumption for her family of five by more than half. We can also do the same in our homes by reusing water wherever possible.

We can also save on electricity. Besides the environmental reasons for conserving, do you know how much labor and human effort is involved in bringing electricity to us? To have this electricity, workers have to set up transmission towers to transmit electricity from the power plant to where it's needed. They also need to maintain them. When there's a problem with a tower, technicians have to go up to fix it, climbing very high and risking their lives. They do it so that our lives won't be affected by the loss of electrical power. We can show our appreciation by turning off lights and electrical products when they are not in use to save electricity. It's even better if we can pull out the plugs as well so that no electricity is drawn at all. These are some ways in which we can cherish electricity and be grateful for it.



Caring for the Earth

We all live on the same planet, so we all share the same resources. Depletion of the Earth's resources will impact the whole humanity, our collective quality of life, and our own collective resources. Let us do something for Mother Earth. If we change our consumerist lifestyle and become more environmentally friendly, we can improve the condition of our environment. By not eating meat and eating vegetarian, we can help to reduce greenhouse gases. By reducing our consumption and doing recycling, we can help reduce pollution, conserve resources, and prevent mountains from being destroyed. Conserving electricity and water also helps prolong these resources.

Dharma Master Cheng Yen often says that "grains of rice can fill up a basket and drops of water can form a river." When we switch to eco-friendly living habits, we reduce our part in the harm done to the Earth. Our eco-friendly living habits may seem insignificant in tackling the planet's environmental problem, but when one person changes to an eco-friendly lifestyle, that's one person protecting the Earth. When two, three, five, a hundred, or a hundred thousand people switch to an eco-friendly lifestyle, that's a hundred thousand people protecting the Earth. When

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more and more people switch to eco-friendly living habits, our collective efforts can protect our planet. One person alone cannot do this; it takes the joint efforts of all people. When everyone switches to eco-friendly living habits we can really curb pollution, mitigate global warming, and save the Earth's resources. As inhabitants of the Earth, let us protect her so that she can remain safe and well. Only when our planet is well can we humankind be safe and well. To give back to the Earth for all that she has provided to us, let us all take care of our planet together.

Written by the Jing Si Abode English Editorial Team
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