

The Butterfly Effect

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
Tuesday, 09 November 2010 11:15



[[Master's Teachings](#)]

The high temperatures in Taiwan broke record after record this summer. Wherever we went, we heard people complaining about the unbearable heat. In fact, Taiwan wasn't the only country forced to endure such blazingly hot weather. In Beijing, temperatures reached 40°C (104°F); in Iran, the mercury topped out at an unbearable 52°C (126°F). The temperatures in some countries were even high enough to melt the tar roads. It felt as if our planet was on fire.

Ironically, at the same time that some nations in the Northern Hemisphere were facing extreme heat waves, other countries in the Southern Hemisphere were coping with freezing cold. Some places were afflicted with droughts, others with floods. There seems to be no end to the extreme weather that plagues our world.

Over 2,500 years ago, the Buddha pointed out that this world is “a world of endurance”—people must constantly endure many difficulties and hardships in order to survive. Today, the world's Four Elements of Earth, Water, Wind, and Fire are out of balance, resulting in erratic climates that cause countless people to suffer, both physically and mentally. This testifies to what the Buddha said about how our world is full of suffering.



We can trace the unbalanced global climate to insatiable human desires. People exploit natural resources without restraint as they crave an ever more convenient and comfortable lifestyle. This causes severe air, water and land pollution. The earth is damaged as a result and all living creatures suffer.

Since unbridled human desire is the root of this problem, it is everyone's inescapable duty to protect the environment, starting from now. Don't think that the power of a single person is too insignificant to make a difference. There is no contribution too small to have an impact. This is called the “butterfly effect”—when a butterfly beats its wings on one side of the world, it sets into motion a chain reaction of meteorological effects that could very well result in a typhoon on the other side of the world. Since even the smallest of actions can have a great impact, each person's effort is precious and essential.

Our recycling work

Before the widespread use of plastic, most garbage consisted of organic waste: perishable fruit peels, vegetable leaves, food waste, paper, etc. But that has certainly changed. Today, most of the world's waste consists of plastic bags and bottles and other items that are not biodegradable.

On August 23, 1990, I gave a speech in Taichung, central Taiwan. In that speech, I made a

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public appeal to the audience to start doing recycling work. Since then, countless people have pitched in to collect and sort recyclables. They have become our recycling volunteers. It was their efforts that helped start the Tzu Chi mission of environmental protection. At the same time, they realize they now have fuller and more meaningful lives. In my eyes, these people are real-life bodhisattvas.

Some of these volunteers can boast a very high social status, but they genuinely humble themselves and let go of their egos to pick up recyclable materials from filthy trash. It doesn't matter to them how dirty, messy, or heavy the recyclables are—they want to give as much of themselves as possible to help protect the environment. Even though they might sweat profusely while doing recycling and feel tired physically, they are happy mentally.

All our volunteers, young or old, know that in order to protect the earth, they must conserve energy and take good care of the things they own to help cut down on carbon dioxide emissions. They have truly lived up to selfless Great Love and given the land their gentle care.



Tzu Chi's recycling effort has spread from Taiwan and become a stream of purity flowing around the world. Tzu Chi volunteers in 17 countries have responded to my appeal. They don't merely talk about environmental conservation—they put it into practice in their daily lives. Our volunteers' long-term endeavors to protect the earth have even won recognition from the United Nations. In 2005, a Tzu Chi representative was invited to give a speech about the foundation's recycling efforts at a World Environment Day event hosted by the UN and the San Francisco city government.

By giving of themselves to protect the environment, our recycling volunteers are making positive impacts in this world. By humbling themselves to sort through recyclables, many have opened their hearts, thrown away their mental garbage, and regained physical and mental well-being.

I believe that only when more people sincerely pitch in to protect the earth will nature regain its balance and all living beings be allowed to thrive and prosper.

Quality recycling

Tzu Chi has engaged in recycling for 20 years. Our next step is to urge everyone to reduce their production of garbage and keep their recyclables clean. Many used things in the world can actually be reused or recycled.

For example, I hope everyone can begin by cooking meals at home instead of eating take-out. Doing so reduces the use of disposable food packaging. When going out, take your own water to avoid buying bottled beverages. In addition, used food cans and beverage bottles should be rinsed before they are recycled. This will keep them from attracting ants and other insects.

I know it may be difficult to ask everyone to do this, but it will not be so hard once people are

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convinced that doing so is for the good of everyone.

Luo Peng Chen-mei (羅彭陳美), a recycling volunteer from Linkou in northern Taiwan, sets a good example. Fully realizing the importance of environmental protection, she spent a lot of time and effort communicating with the management committee of her community. She finally convinced them to carry out night-time recycling in the neighborhood. Starting this May, residents could bring their recyclables to the designated public area every Wednesday and Sunday night. Tzu Chi volunteers were on hand to demonstrate how to sort recyclables.

At first, the recyclables that some residents brought were filthy and dirty, since they had not been rinsed. But a month of effort on the part of our volunteers showed good effect. The recyclables that residents brought to the public area were all properly cleaned and sorted, to the extent that they could be immediately boxed and packed and sent directly to recycling stations.

Our world will become healthier, cleaner and more beautiful when all of us can cut down on the amount of garbage we produce and recycle all reusable resources.



Every bit counts

Months have passed since an earthquake devastated Haiti in January 2010, but little progress has been made to rebuild the country. On July 12, a storm ripped through the survivors' tent areas. In news footage, I saw and heard children shrieking in fear and mothers carrying their kids to escape the storm. But where could they flee? Where could they find shelter? My heart really went out to them.

In comparison, Taiwan is so blessed. When we see suffering, we must realize all the more how blessed we are and constantly remind ourselves to harbor a heart of sincere piety and vigilance. We should calm our minds and closely ponder the purpose of life: Why were we born in this world? What function do we have? What kind of interpersonal relationships do we want to build? How do we coexist with nature? Most importantly, how do we keep the world safe from disasters?

Many people lead deluded lives. In pursuit of excessive enjoyment they create negative karma, thus causing themselves to suffer. Though it is their own actions that cause their suffering, their ignorance keeps them from reflecting on their behavior, and they thus continue to create more bad karma and more trouble. They are caught in an endless cycle of ignorance, bad karma, and suffering.

As long as we live in this world, we must always harbor gratitude and respect for everybody and everything in the world. We should not hold a man-can-conquer-all attitude and ruthlessly exploit natural resources.

The earth is our only home. We must cherish this beautiful planet of ours. If we don't want the earth damaged, we must first start with ourselves. Let us harbor good thoughts and never

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underestimate our strength. Whatever we do, remember that every action can impact the world, so we must constantly remind ourselves to love and protect the earth. Only when we hold nature in awe and respect and care for all living creatures can we say we are leading a truly awakened life.

Just like the stream of purity our recycling volunteers have created in this world, I hope the cycle of goodness and love we have activated in Taiwan can ripple outward to the rest of the world. This way, we can help keep disasters at bay, fill the world with harmony, and give everyone peace and safety.



Let in the light of wisdom

I learned from the news that a couple in Atlanta educated their children about the importance of giving with love. One day in 2006, their 14-year-old daughter Hannah saw a fancy Mercedes-Benz parked on the roadside on her way home. Next to the vehicle was a homeless man who looked haggard with hunger. Hannah thought to herself: If the owner of the car did not drive a luxurious Mercedes-Benz, the money saved could be used to feed many hungry people.

That evening, a concerned Hannah shared her thoughts with her parents. Her mother asked, "What do you want to do? Sell our house?" The family discussed the matter for the following six months. In the end, they decided to sell their luxurious house. Half of the money of the sale was donated to charity for the construction of schools and hospitals in Africa, benefiting over 20,000 people.

The parents spent the remaining money on a small house. Hannah's brother said that he liked their new house better, because the smaller space created more intimate interactions among his family members and brought them even closer.

This is "joyful giving." This family minimized their desire for worldly comfort and put their love into action by donating to charity. They really enriched their spiritual life with their selfless Great Love.

There is a similar story in Taiwan. Zhuang Shi-tian (莊士天), a 70-year-old gentleman who lives in Zhanghua, central Taiwan, had very little when he was young. However, he worked really hard and was finally able to build up a fortune. Sadly, more than ten years ago, he was cheated out of over ten million NT dollars (US\$313,000). He refused to be knocked down, and he managed to gradually overcome all obstacles by leading a frugal life.

He and his family conserve energy by using natural lighting, and they save water by reusing it: The water used to rinse rice is used to wash vegetables and other things, and then to mop the floor. They darn holes in their socks so that they can continue wearing them, and they normally wear their clothes for 10 to 20 years.

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Although they have reduced their material desires to a minimum, their hearts are richer with love. They may lead a frugal life, but whenever they hear of people in need, they are among the first to reach out to help.

The example of the Zhuang family teaches us that we don't need to wait until we are rich to do good. Look at their family—by practicing frugality, they are able to constantly make donations to help others. Mr. Zhuang also donates his labor by tending the plants and flowers at the Zhanghua Tzu Chi Complex, and his wife, Huang Bao-lian (黃寶蓮), serves as a volunteer in our Taichung Tzu Chi Hospital. The other family members also volunteer for Tzu Chi.

Mr. Zhuang's name includes the word "tian [field]." By giving of himself, he truly cultivates fields of blessings for others. His unwavering dedication to benefiting others comes from the wisdom in his heart.

Every human being possesses the ability to put love into action and to inspire others to do good. We should not underestimate ourselves and think that our strength is too limited. Instead, we should open the windows of our hearts and let in the light of wisdom. Then, let us use this wisdom to educate and enlighten others. If we can activate our own love and inspire love in others, appreciate what we have and create more blessings, we'll be leading a truly blessed life.



The world is our responsibility

On July 19, 2010, Tzu Chi was granted a special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations in a meeting at the UN headquarters in New York.

ECOSOC is one of the six main bodies of the UN. Now that we have this special status, we can attend meetings of the council, provide verbal and written recommendations, and learn from the experiences and principles of other NGOs. This means that in the future we will be able to make more accurate decisions based on information provided by the UN. When Tzu Chi volunteers go on international relief missions, we will also be able to apply for assistance and protection from UN-related bodies. This will make our relief missions safer.

With such resources, we will be able to help the suffering even more. This is truly a milestone in the history of our foundation.

Tzu Chi started in 1966 with very limited resources. But we had the seed of purity, compassion, and wisdom that is inherent in our hearts, just as it is inherent in the hearts of all the buddhas. Over the last 44 years, with the help of every committed volunteer, Tzu Chi has held firm to the conviction of "working for Buddhism and for all living beings." It is the mission of Buddhism to care for all living creatures with compassion, guide people to walk in the right direction in life, relieve them from ignorance and worry, and promote selfless Great Love. This is what we have been striving to do.

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The Buddha said that the force of karma is very powerful, and he warned us to be careful with every thought we harbor in our minds. A bad thought can lead to an evil action and bad karma, the impact of which can topple a mountain as tall as Mt. Sumeru. Conversely, a good thought can lead to good deeds, which in turn can bring tremendous blessings to the world.

Tzu Chi volunteers make great resolutions to give to others. They willingly take on the responsibility of bringing joy and relief to the suffering and helping them attain physical and emotional well-being. Their love is greater than Mt. Sumeru.

The footprints of Tzu Chi's charity work have covered 70 countries. The Great Love of Tzu Chi, which transcends all races and religions, has now won recognition from the UN. Having obtained the special consultative status with ECOSOC, we now shoulder an even greater responsibility. To achieve more we must have a greater vision, and we must be stronger and firmer in our convictions. We must make even more effort to take on more charity work so that we can spread Great Love to every corner of the world.

May each one of us live an awakened life by seizing every moment to do good deeds and contributing in the areas where we are needed the most. When others call for our help, respond right away.

I thank you all!