

How Taiwan uses Buddhist literature for environmental education

November 30 2020, by Natasha Heller

Climate change is one of the biggest challenges that the world faces. A United Nations report has cautioned that greenhouse gas emissions due to human activity are [at a record high](#), "with no signs of slowing down." Many nations are recording weather extremes, higher average temperatures and rising seas. Meanwhile, the first wave of increasing numbers of [climate refugees](#) points to how a changing environment will reshape human life.

The changes in climate may have been caused by previous and current generations of adults, but it is the future generations that will have to deal with its worst effects. Today's children will play a critical role in protecting the environment.

Confronting the crisis will require much change—and education is an urgent first step.

As [experts have said](#), this education will need to start early, so that environmentally friendly practices become habits at a young age.

Taiwan offers an example of how to teach children about caring for their environment.

Environmental attitudes in Taiwan

By the early 1990s, rapid economic development had led to

[environmental degradation](#) in Taiwan, an island in the China Sea and home to [nearly 24 million people](#). The air quality in the cities was hazardous, a third of rivers were polluted and garbage often didn't make it to landfills.

Today, however, the Taiwanese take pride in their island's natural beauty—from coastal wetlands to lush green mountains—and in their success in protecting the environment.

Taiwan is especially known for its [high rates of recycling](#) and elaborate sorting systems that even include a category for [food waste destined for pig slop](#). According to [self-reported figures](#), Taiwan now recycles 20% more than the U.S. – and any visitor can attest to the seriousness of recycling efforts.

As a [scholar of Chinese Buddhism](#), I have been looking at how religious groups address contemporary issues, including environmentalism, in children's literature.

Teaching children

In Taiwan, over [a third of adults identify themselves as Buddhist](#), more than any other religion, making it a significant cultural force. Buddhist groups have been at the forefront of efforts to care for the environment. Included in their effort is Buddhist literature for children that reflects environmental concerns.

Picture books on this topic take two approaches: In one, [bodhisattvas](#) – wise and powerful supernatural beings that can appear in the world to help human beings—serve as models for children in the way that they protect the environment.

For example, in the book, "[Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's Great Battle](#)

[against the Trash Monster](#)," published by the Buddhist organization Dharma Drum Mountain, the first page of the story introduces a bodhisattva who wants to transform the polluted world into one that is pure.

This bodhisattva meets a young boy who says he has nightmares about a monster made out of trash. As it turns out, the monster has been appearing because the boy's room is a messy mountain of garbage. When he cleans it up, the bodhisattva prompts him to properly sort everything he throws away, reflecting real practices.

Then the little boy decides to become a "little pioneer of world environmentalism," and accompanies the bodhisattva in cleaning up parks and beaches. In this story, the little boy's concerns grow from his own room to the bigger world, with the bodhisattva modeling compassionate action.

Historically, bodhisattvas have been invoked to help people in times of extreme need (such as a storm at sea), and intervening for the good of the environment updates their role for contemporary times.

In this case Buddhism is central to the story, and cleaning polluted spaces becomes a metaphor for spiritual purification. The reader looks to a bodhisattva or Buddha as guide, and is inspired to take action.

Caring for the environment

But in other cases, Buddhist organizations do not use figures like bodhisattvas to teach about environmentalism.

The stories do not feature bodhisattvas as characters, and the narratives may not be obviously Buddhist, but offer environmental education in the context of a broader Buddhist education. Being a well-rounded Buddhist,

in other words, means knowing and respecting the environment.

They may use stories about plants and animals to teach children about such things as the life cycle of coal and symbiotic relationships between animals, like that of rhinoceroses and oxpeckers, which are popularly thought to eat ticks and other insects, though [the reality is more complex](#)

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Children learn about biology and how living beings are interconnected. This lends itself to thinking holistically about the environment, and these stories often prompt children to look at the world from the perspective of other living beings.

Published by a major Buddhist organization, the book "[Record of the Wanderings of a Plastic Bag](#)" goes a step farther in presenting other perspectives.

A [plastic bag](#) starts out as plaything for a baby, then becomes a place for the cat to nap. The family's grandfather claims it to collect tomatoes, and when he is finished, he washes the bag and hangs it to dry. A bit later, he uses it to carry worn-out shoes to be repaired, at which point the bag blows away.

It travels joyfully on the wind accompanied by a leaf and a candy wrapper, but is eventually swept up into a garbage bag. A dog rips open the garbage, and the bag blows away again, only to be picked up by a child with a stick who treats it as a toy. After it is abandoned by the child—very sadly for the bag—it is picked up, recycled and transformed into shopping bag. This is a happy ending, reflected by the bag's happy smile.

The author, Liu Rugui, writes that she used the bag as a character in the hope of stimulating children's compassion, leading them to cherish the

objects that they use. "Cherishing," according to Liu, leads to a deeper understanding of environmentalism.

There is connection between being able to take the perspective of a plastic bag –entailing both intellectual and emotional responses—and valuing that object, which otherwise might be seen as a piece of trash.

Young readers are prompted to take the perspective of these nonhuman characters, changing how they think about the world and their own actions. This connects to the Buddhist teachings of [karma and reincarnation](#), which mean that every intentional action has a consequence.

Equally important, although one couldn't be reborn as a plastic bag, one could be reborn as an insect or endangered animal. On another level, taking the perspective of a plastic bag helps readers to understand how all elements of the universe are interconnected, a teaching that takes its most sophisticated philosophical form in [Huayan Buddhism](#).

Impact of children's literature

By showing children that they have responsibility in caring for the environment, these books work to produce what sociologist [Bengt Larsson](#) has called, in a 2012 paper, "[ecological selves](#)."

Although studies on the long-term effects of children's literature are limited, there's some evidence that this approach is effective in fostering concern and care for environmental issues.

For example, [a study in Australia](#) found that anthropomorphism, which attributes human traits to animals and things, increased children's concern for parts of the [environment](#), as did their emotional investment in the stories. That is, certain types of books do seem to change

children's attitudes.

As I found in my research, this is something Buddhist organizations recognize as well and incorporate into their educational mission. Growing up Buddhist means growing into environmentalism and global citizenship.

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