

## Growing a Green Practice

Written by Stuart Moody



### A MEDITATION ON PLASTICS

Plastics. They're everywhere. They cover our food, they clothe our bodies. They're in our computers, our gardens, our office supplies... and the ocean.

The first synthetic plastic was invented in the 1860s. Nitrocellulose, alcohol, and camphor produced a substance that could replace natural materials such as ivory and tortoise shell. The large-scale use of plastics took off in 1907 with the development of Bakelite, a more durable plastic, used for objects such as pot handles and telephones.

What began as a strategic boon to industry has grown into an integral part of modern life. It keeps growing. In 1973, annual plastic production in the U.S. reached 29.2 billion pounds. By 2004, the amount nearly quadrupled to 115.2 billion pounds.

With all the uses of plastic, why don't we agree with the American Plastics Council that "plastics contribute to our health, safety and peace of mind"? In one word: non-biodegradability. There are other words, too: toxicity, wildlife fatalities, and non-recyclability.

#### **Non-biodegradability**

Life on earth depends on the constant cycling of energy and materials. Plastics, by virtue of their molecular structure, cannot participate in this cycle; their polymer chains are too long and rigid.

We have all seen Tupperware degrade and chip, polyester shirts wear thin, and bags fall apart. This does not equal biodegradation. We are simply creating smaller and smaller pieces of something that no organism can digest.

#### **Toxicity**

Plastics and their additives are getting into our bodies. Phthalates, for example, have been found in the bloodstreams of most Americans. Higher concentrations of phthalates correlate with higher risk of endocrine disruption. Premature delivery, precocious puberty, cancer, diabetes, and obesity have all been associated with higher rates of exposure to certain plastics and their additives.

## **Wildlife fatalities**

There is virtually nowhere on the ocean free of plastic. Surface trawls in the North Pacific Gyre recovered six pounds of plastic for every one pound of zooplankton. In 1991, there were 317,000 pieces of plastic per sq km in this area. By 2001, the number reached one million.

This debris is killing animals at a staggering annual rate: 100,000 marine mammals; one million birds; countless fish, crabs, and crustaceans.

## **Non-recyclability**

Most plastics cannot be recycled. Those that can are really down-cycled. Consider: plastic milk bottles can be made into “lumber,” not into new milk bottles. Plastic lumber cannot recycle, becoming trash when the structure is damaged or destroyed. In contrast to the recycling of aluminum, glass, and paper, plastics recycling at best offers a short stop on the way to landfill.

## **Searching for solutions**

These problems were not created on purpose, but rather by inventiveness and enterprise, combined with a lack of awareness. The antidote is simple: inventiveness and enterprise, combined with awareness and compassion. Meditation opens the door to these qualities of consciousness. When we are truly awakened, we can use our creative and industrious abilities to discover (and remember) solutions to every problem that plastics were invented to solve. The solutions are abundant; they await only our attention.

*Stuart Moody is a member of Green Sangha, a spiritually-based environmental group which has joined the Campaign Against the Plastic Plague. Green Sangha offers presentations on “Re-Thinking Plastics” to schools, business, and organizations. For more information about plastics in the ocean, check <http://www.algalita.org/videos.html> and click on Synthetic Sea. To learn more about Green Sangha, come to their monthly retreat (second Sunday of the month in Berkeley and third Sunday in Marin, 10 am to 1 pm). Check [www.greensangha.org](http://www.greensangha.org) or call (510) 532-6574.*

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