

Finding your Own Way to a Better Planet

Janet Lau

I was growing my hair long a few months ago, then changed changed my mind and cut it short again. Many were surprised to see me with this new look and asked me why I cut my hair so short. I told them, “as I was growing my hair, I noticed I started to use more conditioner, had more reasons to buy hair accessories, earrings (because earrings look better with longer hair)... and I thought to myself, ‘I could save more resources including time (my shower time was a lot shorter when I had short hair versus long hair), electricity (no need to blow dry my hair), water (quicker shower = saving water), money (no need to buy hair pieces and earrings), and other material resources (earrings and hair pieces are made from natural resources, and the environment is being polluted during the production process), so why don’t I just keep my hair short so I have more time to do things that are more important in my life?’ That’s why I decided to keep my hair short.”

I was surprised that most of my friends found it difficult to believe my reasons, and I realised we have many concepts about saving the environment and we do not challenge ourselves to look outside the box. There are many ways to take care of Mother Earth.

I used to think saving the environment was just something we should do because lots of people said it is a good thing. I thought helping the environment was important, but somehow I did not see the urgency of protecting the environment. Many campaigns mention that to protect our environment is to protect future generations. I guess because I was not married then and had no children, I did not see any connection between me and the future generations. I thought, “by the time the global warming issue comes to a critical point, I’ll be dead, and so it wasn’t my problem.” Having said that, I would recycle whenever I could but I did not see the urgency to act now.

Until one day, I heard a teaching by Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh in which he explained how everything is inter-connected and nothing can stand on its own as a separate identity. This is a non-dualistic thinking.

We are raised with the notion we are ourselves, I am Janet and you are you. I have nothing to do with you and what you do does not affect me. This is dualistic thinking. However, if we look closer within ourselves, we cannot find one thing that can stand alone without having any relationship with other things, and this is called the law of dependent origination. Let me give you an example:

I am writing this article because my friends were surprised to see my short hair, and I have short hair because my stylist helped me with the cut. My stylist has the skills to cut hair because he works at a hair salon and he chose to study hair styling. My stylist had the money to study hair styling because his parents supported him. His parents had the money because of their jobs. They had their jobs because there was a demand and clients were happy with the service provided. And you are reading this because there is Namaskar, this magazine is made of paper. To have the paper, there have to be factories to make paper, and there are workers at the factories, there are machines to make the paper, and there are factories to make the machineries. This could go on and on.

This illustration shows us that for you to read this article, there are many many conditions needed – some are more immediate (e.g. you have the time to read this article, Janet wrote this article), and some conditions are further down the path (e.g. the parents giving birth to the people who work at the paper factories, our interest in spiritual understanding). The fact you are reading this article has to do with many conditions coming together. We cannot pin-point one thing or event that stands alone without having a relationship with another thing, person, or event. This is what we mean by dependent origination, and it can also be called emptiness.



Dependent origination and emptiness seem to be two different ideas, but they are describing the same thing. Dependent origination means in order for one thing to happen, it’s manifestation depends on having the right conditions. When the conditions are sufficient, the thing manifests; when the conditions are not sufficient, the thing does not manifest.

Studying the above example, if we miss anything mentioned (e.g. paper factory workers go on strike or there is no Namaskar), you would not be reading this article. So we say this article is *empty of a separate self* because it’s manifestation depends on many other conditions. As you can see here, emptiness does not mean nothingness; it means there is a lack of a separate identity, or it is full of everything else. Thich Nhat Hanh would say this article is full of non-article elements. And because this article is full of non-article elements, is why this article is this article.

When we understand dependent origination in our lives, we start to realize our well-being depends on the well-being of everything else. To be healthy, we need fresh and healthy food, clean water, fresh air, a healthy society, a harmonious community, and many other things. Because we know without clean water, clean air, a balanced eco-system, we would not be healthy. So, to protect the human race, we need to protect the non-human elements, which means we have to protect everything else with our best effort. When we understand our intimate relationship with other elements, then it comes naturally that we want to protect our resources, rather than just thinking it is a good thing to do. Because we know others’ happiness equals our happiness, and our

happiness depends on the well-being of others. The health of the planet equals the wellness of human beings. When we have a deep understanding of our intimate relationship with everything else, then we instinctively want to protect the environment just like we want to protect our own children.

There are many ways we can protect the environment, and one way is to live a simple life. The second mindfulness training* provides us a guides us beautifully in living simply and tapping into true happiness:

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others; and I will share my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. I will practice looking deeply to see that the happiness and suffering of others are not separate from my own happiness and suffering; that true

happiness is not possible without understanding and compassion; and running after wealth, fame, power and sensual pleasures can bring much suffering and despair. I am aware happiness depends on my mental attitude and not on external conditions, and I can live happily in the present moment simply by remembering I already have more than enough to be happy. I am committed to practicing Right Livelihood so I can help reduce the suffering of living beings on Earth and reverse the process of global warming.

Protecting the environment is not limited to recycling and reusing. It also includes reducing. The simpler we live, the less resources we require, and the more we can preserve our environment. The more we observe our way of living, the more creative ways we can find to protect our Mother Earth, so for me it is to keep my hair short, for you, it can be to turn off the lights when you leave the room, for yoga teachers it can be to turn off the stereo after ending a class.

Combining our small individual actions

can make a huge difference. We can all make the world a better place, let's join our effort together for a healthier planet and happier living beings.

A committed student of Buddhism and yoga, Janet teaches at Pure Yoga, Causeway Bay in Hong Kong.

*The Five Mindfulness Trainings can be found on the Plum Village's website: <http://www.plumvillage.org/mindfulness-trainings/3-the-five-mindfulness-trainings.html>

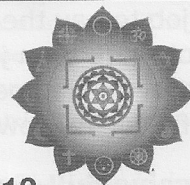


Janet's AYC schedule
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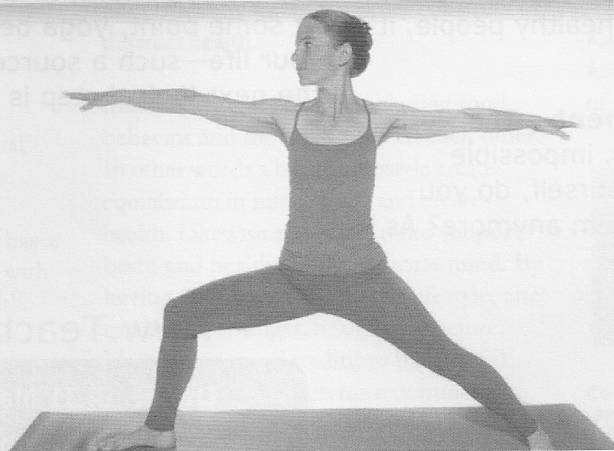


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June 8-9 & 22-23, 2013

Course Venue:

White Lotus Centre
Car Po Comm. Bldg. 20th Fl.
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For details, please contact Hersha Chellaram +(852) 6103-9642 or info@hershayoga.com