

11. The Battery Project

The battery of your “car” is charged when you come to Puttaparthi, or at least when you go to some other holy place. Charge the battery of your spiritual discipline (sadhana) and then, after you return home, do not keep the car idle. If you do, the battery will run down. Take the car around and keep it going; then the battery will charge itself. So also, if you do not continue the company of the good, engagement in truth (Sathpravarthana), devotional singing and repetition of the name, then all this charging becomes a waste. Sathya Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Speaks I, 26, 159.

Your spiritual battery won't go dead if you continue to use it! But the physical batteries in cars, flashlights, clocks and so on do get used up. Throwing these physical batteries away improperly can cause real harm to the environment.

Contents of batteries

Household batteries contain mercury or cadmium. Alkaline batteries are 1% mercury. Prolonged exposure to mercury makes people extremely sick and affects behavior. In the 1600's, hatmakers used mercury in their trade. Many became ill and acted strangely. The effects of mercury were not known, so everyone thought the hatters were crazy and the phrase “mad as a hatter” was coined. That led to the Mad Hatter in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

A damaged, leaking battery thrown in the garbage is a threat to garbage collectors!

Lead-acid batteries are used in cars. The average car battery contains 680g of lead and 5.7l of sulfuric acid. The lead and acid make them particularly hazardous. Acid eats away or dissolves things—including flesh. Lead poisoning can cause convulsions, seizures, coma, mental retardation and even death. Even low levels of exposure can result in fatigue and impaired central nervous system functions. That is why paint has to be lead-free these days. If batteries are disposed of improperly, (e.g. dumping in a field or vacant lot), the lead and acid can seep into the ground, contaminating the environment and polluting the ground water. *Americans use 2 billion disposable batteries each year!*

Things to do

- Use rechargeable batteries. They do contain cadmium, but they can be recharged over and over again, so they last much longer than alkaline batteries. Thus, they contribute less to our hazardous waste problem than do alkaline batteries. Also, they save you money in the long run, because you can recharge them so many times.

Hint: Because rechargeable batteries lose their charge in a month or so, you probably don't want to use them in clocks or thermostats. Use them in flashlights, cassette players, walkmans—things you handle often.

- Take car batteries to a battery recycler. Recycle your small household batteries!
- Have a battery-collection day in your Center, when everyone brings in all the dead batteries they can find. Then dispose of the batteries properly.

In California alone, in 1989, 24 million cars were registered, each with a lead-acid battery. An estimated 2.4 million of these batteries were disposed of improperly.

A Conversation with Swami

Swami: How's your smoking coming along?

Sam Podany: I don't smoke, Swami. Never have.

Swami: How's your smoking?

Sam: I don't smoke, Swami.

Swami: Remember, 20 years ago, when you picked up that cigarette butt?

Sam: But Swami, I was only 16 years old then. How did you know?

Swami: I was there.