

The Way of Environmental Preservation and Restoration

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Introduction

This interdisciplinary study is relevant to the main conference theme of ‘Buddhist Virtues in Social and Economic Development’ as it re-examines the Buddhist ethic of sustainability and its implications for business, within the context of an innovative theoretical perspective, that of Taoism.¹ The study researches primary resources (Taoist scriptures) as well as more recent literature on Taoist ecology. These sources are compared with the literature on Engaged Buddhism.

A declaration at the 5th Vesak conference urged the promotion of dialogue amongst different religions. Accordingly, this paper attempts such a dialogue, as did Waistell and Haigh’s 2009 Vesak article, in which they compared Buddhist and Vaishnava perspectives on sustainability. Historically, Taoism has already influenced the development of Zen Buddhism and there are several parallels between these religions in the domain of sustainability. Therefore, this study places these two traditions alongside each other again to evince a new understanding of Buddhist approaches to environmental preservation and restoration. The paper is concerned with expounding Buddhist ecological virtues by once more allowing them to pass through the prism of Taoism, an ancient tradition that, over the past half century, has increasingly been recognised for its contributions to ecological thinking. This re-encounter between faiths on sustainability is important because “what people do to their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them. Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny – that is by religion” (White, 1967, p.1205). Furthermore, Taoism seeks to transform perceptions and attitudes (Durlabhji, 2004).

Much has already been said about Buddhism’s contribution to ecology; this article will focus on that of Taoism. Business and management scholars have paid only limited attention to Taoism. It has been applied to leadership (Heider, 1986; Herman, 1994; Dreher, 1997; Cheung and Chan, 2005, 2008), total quality management (Hensler et al., 2000), mentoring (Huang et al., 1999), people-based management (Mak, 2000), organizational behaviour (Durlabhji, 2004), Japanese management (Pascale and Athos, 1981), Chinese management (Schlevogt, 2002), corporate social responsibility (Wang and Juslin, 2009), and forecasting performance measurement (Riehm, 2000). However, this article is the first to focus on Taoism and sustainable business and to consider the fusion of Buddhism and Taoism within such a context. This is an important contribution because the synergy between the two faiths can illuminate the way of environmental preservation and restoration. Moreover, businesses are the ultimate cause of most environmental damage and it is they who can make the greatest impact on its reversal. Influencing the philosophy of organisations can help them to operate sustainably.

The paper exposes key environmental themes in Taoism, drawing out their implications for business. Instead of ‘busy-ness’, Taoism proposes no action other than that which is necessary; while one must still earn a living, the tradition questions how much frenetic business activity is really necessary (Lao Tzu, 1963, XX) and, if it is contrary to nature, then it is questionable as to whether it should occur at all. Taoism

¹ The Tao is the path or way (Miller, 2003) and Taoism the following of that way.

questions desire, fundamentally questioning modern marketing activity that promotes greed and envy. The tradition advocates an orientation towards nature that is characterised by unity, harmony, seeing nature as teacher, and adapting to the environment. All species are interconnected and possess intrinsic worth; hence the importance of preserving species diversity, habitat and ecosystems. Finally, meditation and aesthetic appreciation of nature are proposed as methods for restoring our respect for the environment. Following an exposition of Taoist ecological thinking, conclusions will provide a critical evaluation of the relationship between Buddhism, Taoism and sustainable business. Reflecting on the wisdom of both traditions and the dire state of the planet, the recommendations for business are unashamedly radical and paradigm-shifting. Taoism's view of human activity and its impact on the natural world could be seen as unrealistic and impractical. However, its message only appears extreme because business has adopted an extremely impractical and unsustainable approach to nature.

No action

In their study of the philosophical foundations of eminent Hong Kong Chinese C.E.O.s' leadership, Cheung and Chan (2005) observed Taoist doctrines that emphasise flexibility and reversion (where the weak defeat the strong), privileging leader forbearance and minimal interference. Flexibility suggests change and unpredictability where there are many alternatives and opportunities. Reversion, where weakness becomes strength, involves avoiding direct confrontation with obstacles. The archetypal metaphor is that of water, which can penetrate and corrode rocks, even though it is soft. Implications for leaders are that they should neither deviate from the natural course nor coerce followers but gain their support naturally; leadership depends on followership. Those who seek to control the world cannot succeed and those who grasp it will fail (Lao Tzu, 1963, XXV).

Taoism proposes *wu wei* - no action (Lao Tzu, 1963, II): "when one does nothing at all there is nothing that is undone" (Lao Tzu, 1963, XLVIII). This view is supported by Chuang Tzu (1980, XI, p.113); "rest in inaction, and the world will be good of itself."

More accurately, *wu wei* refers to non-assertive action; guided by the way, unattached to material things, empty of self, and acting only in a measured way when appropriate, otherwise there is no need to act (Billington, 1997). *Wu wei* can be translated as actions that appear as almost nothing, and is concerned with appropriate and consummate actions and outcomes, balancing minimal effort with best results (Liu, 2001), and taking no action that is contrary to nature. According to Miller (2001), this action is a spiritual technology that humans can use to cultivate their natures and the nature that surrounds them; nature is the space within which cultivation takes place and the means by which it takes place.

No desire

Taoism further proposes *wu yu* (no desire). Lao Tzu (1963) advocates simplicity, contentedness and freedom from self, warning against excess wealth, luxury, desire and covetousness. Dressing in fine clothes, eating and drinking to excess, and possessing too much wealth is robbery. Storing up too much ends in immense loss, while contentment and knowing when to stop avoids disgrace and danger; thus "you can then endure" (Lao Tzu, 1963, XLIV) – a very ancient lesson in sustainability. Lao Tzu (1963, XXXVII) applies the metaphor of "the nameless uncarved block" to convey simplicity, innocence, and freedom from desire and self. Thus any action should be *wei wu wei* – non-egotistical action (Girardot et al., 2001).

Lao Tzu advocated *jian* – frugality – and contentedness, because “in being content, one will always have enough” (Lao Tzu, 1963, XLVI) – while the greatest crime, misfortune and disaster is being covetous, having too many desires and not being content. In this view, clothing is for keeping warm and food is for satisfying hunger; beyond that is needless luxury and desire (Lau, 1963). Lao Tzu (1963) warns against displaying what is desirable because it unsettles peoples’ minds. Indeed, modern day advertising can be blamed for creating new desires for what would otherwise not be missed (Lau, 1963).

Adapting to the environment

Taoist philosophy is commensurate with science in that it accords with Darwinian evolutionary theory. The (Lao Tzu, 1963, VIII, LXXVI) argues that we should be like flexible plants, supple and yielding, adapting to but not competing with the environment (Patterson and Miller, 2001). In the context of scarce resources, we should identify with and assimilate with the world (Lao Tzu, 1963, LXXVI), by practising mutualism with other species, co-evolving and mutually benefiting (Patterson and Miller, 2001).

Interconnectness and intrinsic worth of all species

Taoism identifies “all things as one” (Chan, 1961, p.184). We share the same category as all species and none have more intrinsic value than the other nor exist to serve others’ needs; the species we eat are no more created for us than we are made for the mosquitoes, gnats, tigers and wolves that prey on us (Fung, 1953). Categorisation and hierarchical ordering of species is only a human artifice and an interference with nature’s way.

Everything undergoes mutual transformation (Cheng, 1997), birth, life and death are like the rotation of the seasons and we come from and return to nature (Chuang Tzu, 1980). Accordingly, intrinsic value can only be of the whole ecosystem, not to individual species and habitats, which are all inextricably entangled. Thus in its approach to all species, Taoism is holistic, inclusive, impartial, and non-hierarchical, privileging mutuality and interconnectedness (Lai, 2001).

Harmony

Chuang Tzu (1980, IX) describes an ancient time, a time of the Way, when nature was unmarred by humans, who lived in harmony and compatibility with nature. People moved quietly, there were no roads, species flourished and everything was one. Humanity was in a state of natural integrity but then came “destruction of the natural integrity of things, in order to produce articles of various kinds, - this is the fault of the artisan” (Chuang Tzu 1980, IX, p.98). Rulers are also blamed for bringing about environmental degradation (Chuang Tzu, 1980, XIV).

The Tao is like water; benefiting myriad things but never striving against them (Lao Tzu (1963, VIII). Taoism is concerned with harmony and balance; working with nature, not against it (Page, 1989). Taking no action that is contrary to nature leaves nothing undone and allows the world to flourish in harmony with nature (Lao Tzu, 1963, XXXVII). This harmony is important to nature and should not be thrown off balance (China Taoist Association, 1995).

The implications of Taoism for sustainable business are to work with nature and not against it. For example, working against nature includes genetically modifying species, as this violates organisms, transferring genes from one species to another, and may stress animal species. Working with nature includes creating, supporting and using natural energy sources such as solar, water and wind power. Other examples of working with nature include agroecology; “the study of the relation of agricultural crops and

environment” (<http://stats.oecd.org>), where agriculture is not treated as an isolated entity but as part of ecology, interacting with species and drawing on the traditional farming knowledge of indigenous populations (<http://www.ecology.gen.tr>). Of particular note is ecosystems agroecology, which holds that modern agriculture loses its ecological foundation when it exclusively focuses on socio-economic factors in food generation, that large-scale agriculture is inappropriate, and those natural systems, which are stable and resilient, are the best model for agriculture to follow for sustainability (<http://www.ecology.gen.tr>).

A good way of working with nature is biomimicry (applying lessons learnt from nature to technology). For example, Yin Xi (1936) argues that we learnt how to weave nets from spiders. Modern examples include an aerodynamic car modelled on the boxfish, seaweed-inspired antibacterial agents, gecko-style adhesives, whirlpool-inspired efficient exhaust fans, and taking inspiration from lotus leaves to develop self-cleaning clothes and paint that avoid the use of detergents (<http://www.treehugger.com>). Of course, the emphasis must always be on learning from nature in order to create efficient and sustainable technologies for the health of the whole ecosystem. In so doing, our relationship with nature changes from seeing it as a slave, whose resources are appropriated, to that of teacher. Having passed through a long process of evolution that has determined what works well and lasts, nature offers a par excellence model, mentor and measure, providing an ecological standard to evaluate the sustainability of innovations (<http://www.asknature.org>).

Restoration ecology is another example of working with nature, as it initiates and accelerates ecosystem recovery in terms of sustainability, health and integrity (<http://www.ser.org>). Examples include reforestation, revegetation and species reintroduction. Restoration ecology recognises that anthropocentrism is wrong in both its aims and methods. In terms of aims, ecology is seen as having intrinsic value, irrespective of humanity. With regard to methods, anthropocentrism is mistaken when it militates against nature, because humanity depends on and is served by nature, which provides food, water and fuel. The planet actually provides important services to humanity, which we would be foolish to ruin. Its ecosystem services include “the purification of air and water, detoxification and decomposition of wastes, regulation of climate, regeneration of soil fertility, and pollination of crops” (<http://www.ecology.gen.tr/what-is-ecology/140-restoration-ecology.html>).

According to the China Taoist Association (1995, cited in Cooper and Palmer, 1998), we should restrain ourselves from anything that is of great immediate interest and profit if it runs counter to nature’s harmony and balance. We have two choices; exploit nature or observe and follow its way, because insatiable human desire leads to over-exploitation of natural resources and being too successful is actually the path to defeat. The CTA also emphasises that, instead of exploiting nature, we should allow it to grow in its own way, observing and following the way of nature, as its sustaining power is limited.

Nature as teacher

Because humanity shares a common root with nature, Taoism advocates a return to and conformity with nature; consequently, Taoism sees nature as our best teacher (Cheung and Chan, 2008). Following the way of the Earth, which in turn follows the Tao, nature is not only our finest tutor but “an unlimited vehicle for human enlightenment and social development” (Jiyu and Yuanguo, 2001, p.118). Nature’s lessons are twofold. Firstly, technological development can come from copying nature (as in biomimicry, above). Secondly, we learn from nature’s reactions to how we work against it; carbon

emissions result in climate warming, leading humanity to reconsider how it interacts with nature and the consequences. This learning can lead to the realisation and acceptance of key ecological principles, such as intergenerational equity (descendants have equal rights to biodiversity and natural capital) and the precautionary principle (long-term significant environmental impacts and scientific uncertainty demand caution) (Yencken, 2000).

Meditation and unity with nature

Being in harmony with nature and *wu wei* might have been easier to comprehend and achieve – even taken for granted – by Taoist sages. After all, it is a natural state and can come naturally and without force. However, while the Tao is the Great Way, it is not a popular main road and people often drift down shop-lined side streets instead, becoming obsessed with what they have to offer:

“What then is Tao? – There is the Tao of God, and the Tao of man. Inaction and compliance make the Tao of God: action and entanglement the Tao of man...The distance which separates them is great” (Chuang Tzu, 1980, XI, p.116).

Furthermore, many modern people have not encountered Taoism and also experience and observe a disharmonious relationship with nature. So how can this harmonious state be achieved? The disposition of *wu wei* can be nurtured through meditation, the goal of which is to become transparent through *zuowang* (sitting in oblivion) (Girardot et al., 2001). Just sitting, without thoughts or desires, conforms the mind to Tao:

“When water is still, it is like a mirror, reflecting the beard and the eyebrows. It gives the accuracy of the water-level, and the philosopher makes it his model. And if water thus derives lucidity from stillness, how much more the faculties of the mind? The mind of the Sage being in repose becomes the mirror of the universe, the speculum of all creation” (Chuang Tzu, 1980, p.131).

The Tao cannot be defined but can be known through meditation and awareness, which discloses what is happening; “effective action arises out of silence and a clear sense of being” (Pheng, 2003, p.283). In this way, the meditator can gain fuller appreciation of environmental damage and cease contributing to it. The tranquil state is our original nature and enables unity with nature.

Aesthetic culture

Taoism’s concreteness is not concerned with general theories, principles and ethics but with environmental ethos and aesthetics in our own particular time and place (Ames, 1986). Unlike Western thinking, Taoism’s approach to ethics and ecology is through aesthetics (Hall, 2001). Taoism excludes anthropocentrism and instead advances aesthetic understanding, which is norm less and nontheoretical; “*wu* – forms of unprincipled knowing (*wuzhi*), nonassertive action (*wuwei*), and objectless desire (*wuyu*)” – desiring that does not own or control its object – letting be and letting go (Hall, 2001, p.247).

Desiring and acting that objectifies the natural world leads to objectifying the self (Hall, 2001). In contrast, the non-anthropocentric perspective can be seen in the following text:

“Maojiang and Lady Li were beauties for human beings, but fish upon seeing them would seek the deeps, birds on seeing them would fly high, and deer upon seeing them would dash off. Which of these four understands what is really handsome in this world!” (Zhuangzi 6/2/69, in Hall, 2001, p.260).

What is beautiful from a human perspective is only a narrow and limited human view that is not shared by other species. “Who shall say who has the correct standard of beauty?” – it is impossible to know (Chuang Tzu, 1980, II, p.44). Furthermore, the text suggests the danger that we may miss the beautiful if we do not attempt to stand outside our anthropocentric perspective. Arguably, taking such a perspective would be impossible for a person to achieve but at least we could try to adopt new perspectives of our natural surroundings that take other species into account.

Hall (2001, p.262) argues for a language of deference, not reference; “for only if we are successful at avoiding denotation, classification, stipulation...can we engage the world as it really is.” We should put ourselves in the place of that which is known, desired and acted in accordance with, making a non-assertive and deferential response to them; this deference and yielding calls forth deference and yielding from others, producing a virtuous circle. *Wuwei* (nonassertive action) emphasises a mirroring response;

“it is action that, by taking the other on its own terms, defers to what it actually is. *Wuwei* involves recognizing the continuity between oneself and the other, and responding in such a way that one’s own actions promote the well-being both of oneself and the other” (Hall, 2001, p.257).

The illustrative metaphor for this is a dancing couple; “a dyadic harmony of non-assertive actions” (Hall, 2001, p.258).

In Taoism, the world is a complex process of transformation and so everything has ontological parity and nothing is privileged in relation to the others (Hall, 2001). However, the fact that everything changes does not mean allowing the environment to decay. Quite the reverse! The Taoist does not appreciate despite the prospect of losing what is desired, but because of such a prospect.

Species diversity, habitat and ecosystems

Ecological sustainability requires recognition of the complex interdependent relationships in ecosystems and the maintenance of biodiversity of species and ecosystems (Yencken, 2000). Taoism looks back to a time when species flourished and nature was unmarred by humans; so now we should not engage in destruction for production or attempt to change species’ conditions of life (Chuang Tzu, 1980). Each species has its own disposition (*te*) and therefore demands our respect and preservation (Callicott, 1994). Different species can coexist harmoniously and the success of one species does not require another’s failure (Birdwhistell, 2001).

With the ‘Book of Supreme Peace’ in mind, the China Taoist Association (1995, cited in Cooper and Palmer, 1998) says that Taoism possesses a unique value of judging affluence by the number of different species and that we should have a correct standard of success when pursuing human development. In other words, an impoverished earth is our poverty but a wealth of flourishing diverse species means that we are wealthy. Wealth is seen in terms of environmental preservation and restoration, not as destruction through exploitation for personal wealth.

The preservation of species necessarily calls for the preservation of their habitats. A man sleeping in a damp place gets lumbago, but an eel does not, while a man is nervous high up in a tree but a monkey is not (Chuang Tzu, 1980, II). There is no absolute right habitat or food. A frog argues to a turtle that his is the better habitat in a well – but the turtle becomes stuck in the well (Chuang Tzu, 1980, XVII); the moral of the story is that we need to respect the perspectives of each species. Diverse species live in various places and eat different things, so it is impossible to standardise the right places to live and things to eat. Each creature needs to act commensurate with their capacities; so we should not attempt to change species' conditions of life (Chuang Tzu, 1980, VII). Thus we should not force our standards onto other species but attempt a non-anthropocentric view. In recognising that species are inseparable from their habitats, Taoism embraces the beginnings of an ecological perspective. Ecology is a non-anthropocentric perspective of the relationship between species and the environment (Yencken, 2000).

Places and creatures naturally fit together and therefore diversity is a characteristic of life's flourishing (Birdwhistell, 2001). As diversity is so important to sustaining life, humans are responsible for nurturing the well-being of species and their habitats. The earth is not our habitat alone and we need to view it from the perspective of different species. Thus in order to treat species, one should not treat them by human (or inhumane) standards but allow them to roost in forests, swim in lakes or feed on plains (Chuang Tzu, 1980). The wider approach suggested here is supported by Yencken (2000), who argues that, along with maintaining biodiversity of species and ecosystems, ecological sustainability also requires the protection of natural capital of air, water, and soils; maintaining balance of planetary energy and material cycles; and maintaining health and resilience of life support systems, with their natural cycles of waste absorption.

Conclusion:

In the context of environmental preservation and restoration, Buddhism and Taoism possess certain similarities, both seeking to control desire through non-attachment to material things, thus encouraging contentedness. The traditions are also similar in their emptying of self to develop a non-anthropocentric unity with nature, achieved through meditation. However, Buddhism can learn from Taoism's focus on nature as the way. Nature features prominently in Japanese Buddhism, so much so that "nature became the Absolute through which people could seek salvation" (Asquith and Kalland, 1997, p.3). Nevertheless, this feature of Japanese Buddhism could be emphasised more across all Buddhist traditions.

In the context of the current significant environmental crisis, Taoism offers a radical proposition that we should take no action that is contrary to nature. The tradition is commensurate with Darwin's theory of evolution in that it privileges adapting to but not competing with the environment. Unlike other religions, Taoism (and Buddhism) can sit comfortably alongside science, making it acceptable to the modern mind. In fact, Taoism provides an important lesson for technological development, which is to regard nature as our best teacher, because it has already discovered how to achieve sustainable development from the process of evolution. Unlike the Judaeo-Christian tradition which has traditionally emphasised dominion over nature, Taoism suggests that we defer to it.

At a time of catastrophic loss of species, Taoism proffers the remedy of acting in mutually beneficial ways towards other species. The overriding emphasis is on working in harmony with nature, not exploiting it in a narrow-minded pursuit of profit, which ultimately leads to defeat. Taoism even shifts our very notion of wealth to the number of different species and the health of their diverse habitats.

Taoism has another unique contribution in that it can win hearts and minds in the interests of environmental preservation and restoration. Firstly, it privileges aesthetics, not ethics, in the attitude towards nature; arguably, love and appreciation of the natural world will be a stronger motivating source than a code of ethics. Secondly, Taoism sees nature as a vehicle for enlightenment; it is where cultivation happens and it is how it happens.

This article has selectively drawn out the environmental aspects of philosophical Taoism, excluding the tradition's accumulation of religious trappings and recognising that it is not always wholly in accordance with sustainability. Not all Taoist texts support deep ecology and non-anthropocentrism (Birdwhistell, 2001). Paper (2001, p.12) criticises deep ecologists who seek support for their views from Taoism, arguing that their stance is an ahistorical, overly literal, modern, western interpretation that relies on two enigmatic texts and states "that a Western Daoism can solve a crisis assumed to be brought on by and unredeemable through Western thinking implies a logical contradiction." Moreover, nature is a sacred space for Taoists but it does not necessarily follow that they are good environmentalists (Miller, 2003). The cradle of Taoism, China, has not been an exemplary environmentalist nation, either historically or currently.

Nevertheless, in Taoism, nature is accepted as complete in itself; changing it will turn perfection into imperfection, leading to disaster (Billington, 1997). So in the context of *wu wei*, we must reflect on the course of human history and ask how many of our actions and impacts on the environment were truly necessary. We remain caught up in the modernist myth of advancement while nearly every step we take is a step backwards in environmental terms. So this is not progress for nature – and therefore it is not progress according to Taoism. Apart from modern medicine, what else was so necessary to achieve? If we compare the planet now with before humanity's overweening pre-eminence, have we really progressed at all?

Business needs to move away from fostering a rampant materialism that disregards environmental impacts, focusing instead on environmental preservation and restoration. The increasing severity and scale of environmental damage demands nothing less than a fundamental change in business – a deep ecology. If we accept Taoism's injunction not to take any action that is contrary to nature, then this will mean no or negligible carbon emissions. It will mean learning from and working with nature, not exploiting it. It will mean focusing on nature, not profit, and reconceptualising wealth as the number of different species and the health of their diverse habitats. Taoism calls for an end to exploitation of people and planet and demands a value-based (e.g. mutualism) and principle-based approach to sustainable development (e.g. intergenerational equity, interspecies equity and the precautionary principle). Business growth necessitates growth of a purchasing population and increasing acquisitiveness – but interspecies and intergenerational equity demands an end to the current exponential growth of human population and material possessions.

Business interacts with society and both need to move towards a philosophy of *wu yu* (no desire); meeting basic needs but not encouraging greed. If the good life involves simplicity, frugality and contentedness then financial institutions should no longer promote excess wealth, the car industry should focus on small electric cars not luxury vehicles, and the food and drinks industry should not encourage eating and drinking to excess. Marketing departments should not foster desire and covetousness but adopt new aims of meeting needs.

Critics may argue that this is too radical an approach. However, it is necessarily radical in view of the radical threats to the survival and health of our own and other

species. Is it impracticable? No. Religion, indeed all ideologies, can have a powerful and persuasive impact on minds and behaviours. Is it achievable and realistic? Nature's way is great - and many do not follow it currently - but perhaps we are running out of choices. Is there a Buddhist middle way? For example, Durlabhji (2004, p.401) argues that “a general principle of yin-yang balance as an essential dynamic for performance and harmony in a wide variety of contexts is suggested.” However, this is the problem with middle ways, as they can sanction and justify a situation by ameliorating its worst excesses. Having overpopulated and radically damaged the planet, halving our environmental impacts is simply not going to work.

Lao Tzu (1963, 1) makes it clear that those without desires will perceive the Way, while those with desires will see only what they desire. So there is a self-perpetuating problem that desire breeds desire. How can this cycle of attachment be broken? The answer lies in meditation and promoting its use in society and the workplace. Is this too much to ask? Not necessarily. Currently “Britain enjoys a meditation boom” (Skidelsky, 2011, p.16) so it is not unreasonable to hope that this could become more and more widespread globally. Meditation offers not just a counterweight to frenzied activity and overstimulation of thoughts and desires – but it can help organisational and societal members to see more clearly what ought and ought not to be done.

More interdisciplinary research is necessary to promote environmental synergies between disciplines, such as biology and architecture/engineering, to further promote working with nature (for example, through biomimicry). Just as important will be more interdisciplinary research between disciplines such as theology, philosophy, sociology, psychology and business to see the potential for mindfulness meditation for changing unsustainable ideologies to those that reflect environmentalism.

Finally, given that the Tao cannot be articulated but only tacitly known through Taoist practices such as meditation, writing about Taoism is necessarily limited. On that note, writing must now give way to silently meditating on nature's way.

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