



### Origin of the Nine Precepts

The idea for creating the Nine Precepts sprung from discussion with scientist

Rupert Sheldrake who has developed the theory of morphogenetic fields and Taoist scholar and physicist Shantena Sabbadini who has translated Tao Te Ching and the I Ching. The combination of these two disparate, yet oddly congruent, fields of study started me thinking about cultural forms (whether material or immaterial) which act as attractors, and the function that written spiritual works such as the Tao Te Ching play in human culture and discourse. Sabbadini mentioned that the Tao Te Ching functioned as sort of a vessel that held the wisdom of day and of the Tao. The Tao means something akin to the way of life or way to organize human life. Human life and the ways to live it were always in a constant state of change. There is no constant Tao as ways to live are always relative and changing. The language of words can not touch the reality of life, so the Tao teaches that we must focus on the experience of living. Sabbadini does something ingenious in his interpretive guide to Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching: he offers a multitude of possible interpretations of key lines in the text. Alongside this, he offers charts that list the many possible literal translations of each Chinese characters of the text. One can see why so many scholars in the West were called to mine the text for themselves, and present their own unique translation of the perennial classic. With this multifaceted presentation, Sabbadini offers up the wisdom of the Tao in a written form that beautifully mirrors the Taoist philosophy of an ever-changing, transient world that transcends its own definitions and boundaries.

These juxtapositions of the form and the formless, of translations that offer up alternative translations, of morphogenic language fields that may exist as immaterial forces, shaping the development of living beings, started me thinking about cultural forms for this age. How do we create a new

guide form that will be a vessel (Sabbadini's terms) to carry or hold all the good and noble things we have to offer? What would a Tao Te Ching written for our age look like? I began to imagine a Tao of reciprocal ecology, a new field of study that explores our social relationships with plants, animals and other living beings. What kind of form would attract people to not only start thinking more about their relationships with other forms of life, but also start thinking more consciously about how their own actions in the world affect the lives of other beings, both positively and negatively? What kind of written form would help people not only think about their interactions with other beings, but also incorporate some of the philosophy into their own internal guiding principles, and begin to act upon these values? The form would need to be open to variable interpretations to speak to a wide variety of people from all different cultural backgrounds, but at the same time, have a central firm message at its core. It would need to be in a form something like the Tao Te Ching... but shorter (as our collective attention spans are now shorter)... and more memorable... and more easily digestible ... and so the Nine Precepts of Gentle-Doing Ecology were born. (While this last statement is meant to be partly tongue-in-cheek, it is also partly true- we must create cultural vessels to hold the restless, impatient spirit of the time in which we live...).

### Rules of Engagement

In the playful, interpretive spirit of both the I Ching, and Goethean science scholar, Henri Bortoft's work on the hermeneutical tradition, I have decided to set up some unique guidelines for my discussion of the Nine Precepts. While I have written the Precepts without directly relying on any other texts, they have been influenced, of course, by all of the readings, teachings and discussions I have taken part in during the course of my education. Upon examination, the Nine Precepts share a good deal both in spirit and in substance with the Eight Point Deep Ecology Platform written by

Arne Naess and Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching. In my discussion on the Nine Precepts, I will note some of the commonalities between the texts, but I will make reference to the Nine Precepts as if they were written by another author. The idea here is not to excuse my responsibility as author, but rather to keep the meanings of the Precepts alive and open to interpretation so that the reader will find his own way in engaging with the dynamic text. As Bortoft writes: *"The dynamical approach to hermeneutics frees us from the constraint of believing that the meaning is either determined or undecidable, by showing us that it is in fact inexhaustible"* (2012, loc. 2701). To further this experiment in opening up and 'growing' the meaning of a text, I have asked my colleague, He Longxiang, to translate the Nine Precepts into Chinese, and then back again into English. While I have shown Longxiang some my initial notes on the Precepts, and have had several short discussions with him explaining my intentions in writing this piece; the translations are wholly his, filtered through his own unique linguistic, cultural and personal experience with the world. Toward the end of the paper I will provide the text of Longxiang's translations, and discuss some thoughts on the possible benefits of leaving a text alive and undeciphered, and open to further interpretation.

### **The Concept of Wu-Wei and Gentle Action**

We will begin with a brief discussion of wu-wei, the Taoist principle of non-action which I believe might prove useful as an ethical underpinning of a new positive ecology movement. While often translated as "non-action", wu-wei may be better understood as gentle, right, non-egocentric or harmonious action. It asks that before any action is undertaken, that one first considers the action from the perspective of a long-term holistic view of an interdependent, interactive natural world. The action may be evaluated in terms of whether it will be in harmony, and find a kind of equilibrium with all of the other living beings and systems in the world. Philosopher Chung-ying Cheng writes, "... the ecology of the earth should provide a model for human non-action and natural spontaneity in which one must contemplate and reflect on one's creative activity so that it

*matures to a real fulfillment of value at large."*  
(Tucker et al.1998, p. 229)

In the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu asks the reader to contemplate the principle of wu-wei:

*Can you penetrate everything with your inner clarity and putty without having the need for action?  
Generating and nourishing,  
generating and not possessing,  
being effective and not retaining,  
Increasing and not domination: thus is the secret Life (10).*

Physicist and writer F. David Peat has written how this concept of gentle action (Peat, 1989) might be key in effectively shifting organizations and societal thinking in a way that is in greater harmony with the rest of the natural world. He contends that rather than imposing an abrupt external change on an existing living or social system, (which are fundamentally non-local and holistic systems), that a small thoughtful shift from within the system may act as a balancing corrective on the system. Having a greater understanding of the system allows the change-maker to know the tipping-points or small actions that will activate the whole system to make a positive change. This, too, is the perspective taken by much of holistic medicine: namely that gentle actions including mild medicines and therapies applied at the right time, in the right manner, will bring the patient back into a more balanced state of health. Medicines that are too strong in their action, such as most pharmaceuticals, push the bodily systems too quickly and too strongly in one direction. There is, therefore, a counter-reaction to too strong medicines which might manifest as immediate side-effects or long-term imbalances in the patient's health. Keeping the way of the Tao and the strength of small, thoughtful gentle actions in mind, let's now take a look at the healing prescription of the Nine Precepts.

### **Nine Precepts of Gentle-Doing Ecology**

1. *Let nature be*
2. *Life may eat to live, but ideas should not hunt*
3. *In all kinds there is great beauty and worth*
4. *Give love to those with you*
5. *What life is there, belongs*
6. *If you are great in number, do less*
7. *More sharing - more alive, more connected*
8. *Learn by soft-action, soft-looking*
9. *Allow the change to be to be*

## One Interpretation of the Nine Precepts

### 1. Let nature be

This concept, though just three short words, asks us to allow nature to self-will, to intrude less on her processes, and lessen the imposition of our many wants and needs on other living beings. If enough land is given back to nature, it will in time, enhance trophic diversity. Trophic diversity leads to stronger, healthier, more resilient ecosystems.

Of course, human beings, by their very nature are disturbers of nature, and with a growing (or even constant population level), likely only a small fraction of the land on earth will ever be voluntarily allowed to revert back to a wild state. This is where the concepts of wu-wei and non-interference come into play. We must continually, consciously assess how our interventions in natural systems can be minimized, so that we take the most harmonious or 'right' course of action. It is only then that our societies can begin to regain the delicate balance with the Tao and the rest of the natural world. An acceptance and understanding of the way and rhythms of the Tao, can lead to a stance that is at peace with letting the living beings and systems of the world do their own thing without us feeling a need to intercede.

This precept echoes point five of Arne Naess' Eight Point Deep Ecology Platform: "*Present human interference in the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening*" (Naess, p. 68). As Naess states in his comments, human interference in natural systems has gone on since time immemorial; what is at issue here is the type and extent of the interventions and consequential destruction. Naess goes on in his commentary to advocate for putting aside a larger amount of land that may be left wild.

Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching concurs:

*Less and less do you need to force things,  
Until finally you arrive at non-action  
When nothing is done,  
Nothing is left undone.  
True mastery can be gained  
By letting things go their own way.  
It can't be gained by interfering. (48)*

### Summary:

*Let nature be and self-will*

*Do not disturb - let nature repair*

*We by our ecological nature are disruptors, but we need to disrupt less because there are too many of us*

### 2. Life may eat to live, but ideas should not hunt

The first precept, let nature be, leads into the second in that it asks us not to kill (or modify) any living being unless that being's life is being taken to feed another living being. This idea is allied with the third point of Arne Naess' Eight Point Deep Ecology Platform: "*Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital need*" (ib.). The word 'vital' is well chosen here, as in addition to eating, we may also kill another being in order to protect the life or health of a loved one, or for example, to build a house.

The second half of this precept is perhaps a little more puzzling to decipher: what does it mean that ideas should not hunt? What the precept is getting at, I believe, is that humans should not seek to kill or eradicate animals (including other humans), plants or other living beings because they believe they shouldn't be in a certain place, at a certain time. The idea of native and non-native plants and the concept of invasive species are just that, ideological stances that when examined closely have very little science or careful thought to back them up. These stances are often simply opinions based on the erroneous conceptions that an ecosystem should be static and frozen in a moment-in-time, rather than the ever-shifting and dynamic living systems that they truly are. Though an in depth discussion of the merits of this perhaps controversial opinion is beyond the scope of this short commentary, we might simply say that humans have created lots of pain and suffering in the past when killing for strongly-held ideological beliefs. This second precept asks that we do not kill other living beings when the killing is based on ideological belief-systems concerning the way the world should or should not be.

### Summary:

*Life should not be killed for an idea*

*Do not kill any being unless that being is being eaten to feed another being*  
*Ideas are often wrong; we are not wise nor kind enough to determine who should be eradicated.*

### **3. In all kinds there is great beauty and worth**

This precept implies that all kinds of living beings have intrinsic worth and are beautiful in their own way. While their beauty and worth may not be obvious to us at all times, the more we come to understand the interconnectivity of the world, the more we can see that every being, (even ones that seem repugnant or noxious to us, seem to have no discernible value for the human species, or threaten our bodily health), plays some important, integral role in the living world.

This precept in concert with point 1 of Naess' Eight Foundational Principles: "*The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: inherent worth, intrinsic value, inherent value). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.*" and point 2: "*Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are values in themselves*" (ib.).

#### **Summary:**

*Do not judge one kind of plant or animal or other living being as superior or inferior to another; each kind of being has a right to live.*

### **4. Give love to those with you**

We, by some strange perversity of our human nature, often most appreciate the animals and plants that are rare or live far away from us in a distant land or sea. We must learn to cultivate an appreciation and love for the pigeons, the cockroaches, the mice, the rats, the raccoons, the deer, the dandelion and the common plantains of the world that live by our doorsteps. These are the beings that share with us, live near us, that offer us opportunities for reciprocity, and for wild plant and animal companionship. We may choose to create boundaries, and keep them from entering our homes for reasons of health and sanitation. We should not, however, forget that their presence in our lives is a gift. Therefore, if you dedicate your life for the benefit of the world, you can rely on the world.

If you love dedicating yourself in this way, You can be entrusted with the world. (13)

#### **Summary:**

*Love the plant and animal that live near you (in your biodia), that want to share with you -their presence is a gift and should be treated as such*

### **5. What life is there, belongs**

The idea being expressed here seems to be that we shouldn't think we know what plants and animals should belong in our yard, in our parks or in an ecosystem. We should simply know that the ones thriving and living there at this moment in time - belong. Understanding that we are surrounded by other beings that belong to the place where we live may also lead to us feeling that we too belong in this greater community of living beings.

*Do you want to improve the world?*

*I don't think it can be done.*

*The world is sacred.*

*It can't be improved.*

*If you tamper with it, you'll ruin it.*

*If you treat it like an object, you'll lose it. (29)*

#### **Summary:**

*Know that the living beings living in a given place at this moment in time – belong.*

### **6. If you are great in number, do less**

There is little doubt that the extent and degree of anthropogenic environmental damage that has occurred in the last three generations is due to an overpopulation of humans on the earth. In less than sixty years the human population has more than doubled from an estimated 3 billion in 1960 to just under 7 billion in 2010. For whatever reason, this crucial fact seems to be less talked about among environmentalists and public figures than it was in the recent past. This large jump in human population has exponentially increased the rates of species extinction, climate change, land development and natural resource extraction and depletion. Though, as Naess points out, the decrease and stabilization of the human population may take hundreds of years to achieve, at this present moment in time, humans who are alive must begin to do less. This means: having less children, polluting less, using less natural resources, and developing less land.

Naess in point 4 of the Platform: "*The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires such a decrease*" (ib).

*When man interferes with the Tao,  
The sky becomes filthy,  
The earth becomes depleted,  
The equilibrium crumbles,  
Creatures become extinct. (39)*

**Summary:**

*Be less, do less- there are too many of us and we need to disrupt less and use fewer resources  
Less reproduction, less use of resources.*

## **7. More sharing - more alive, more connected**

This concept of sharing and reciprocity encourages people to be less self-centered, and reach out and share both their material resources (land, food, shelter, etc.) and social relationships (such as companionship, play, love, protection ) with other plants and animals (including other humans). This practice of having social relationships with other non-human beings is known as reciprocal ecology. Practicing reciprocal ecology makes the practitioner feel more connected to their greater community of living beings, and to the world. These feelings of emotional and social connection with other living beings results in people caring for and protecting those with whom they have a social relationship. Reciprocity, sharing and friendship with other species all contribute to positive emotional feelings of aliveness and happiness in those doing the sharing.

**Summary:**

*To share more is to be most alive and connected  
Share what you have with others living beings  
Share food and water and companionship*

## **8. Learn by soft-action, soft-looking**

A more intuitive way to phrase this might be: learn by soft-looking (careful observation) and then proceed to soft or gentle action. The action taken should be carefully considered, and have a positive impact on other living beings. However, putting the words "soft-action" first emphasizes to the reader that each of our actions has consequences in the

world which need to then be carefully considered before taking our next action. Here the concept of wu-wei may be thought of as harmonious action. When a living system is healthy, it is in a state of equilibrium that at the same time is responsive to ever-changing external and internal conditions.

A good example of this precept in action (or non-action, if you like) is the practice by good farmers who watch and carefully observe their land for a year or longer before they begin to cultivate it with crops. They notice where the sunshine is abundant and where there is shade at each hour of the day, throughout each season. They notice which kinds of plant communities already exist or volunteer on the land. This knowledge can give them information on the soil type, soil-mineral content, water supply and organic matter in the soil. They watch the animals, large and small, that come and go on the land. They notice how the waters move across the surface of the land after a heavy rainfall, and how the waters drain. They observe the structure and pH of the soil, and how it changes with soil amendments which they gradually add. All of this information, gained through patient, careful observation, can inform a wise farmer on how to best make use of the land for his own purpose while also maintaining, or ever improving, the health of the land for the living beings that live there.

**Summary:**

*Observation not intervening  
Stand back and watch and let nature self-will  
This is how we can learn how healthy ecosystem grow and change*

## **9. Allow the change to be to be**

I believe what is meant here is the living earth and all of her beings are in a constant state of interdependent flux, exchange and evolution. We are just one, over-abundant, very disruptive animal that needs to humble itself and let nature get on with her processes. We need to recognize this in our nature and then let go of our obsessive need to modify and control all living being and systems. We need to let nature be.

**Summary:**

*Let the Tao be*

## Nine Precepts of Gentle-Doing Ecology

### 柔和行動生態學的九個守則

nine principle: soft / harmonious movement / action to the field of life

1. Let nature be

**自然而然** being as it is originally

2. Life may eat to live, but ideas should not hunt

**天作孽，有可違，自作孽，不可活** if the heaven make hunt, people can escape;  
if the people make hunt selfishly, there is no way out

3. In all kinds there is great beauty and worth

**真常應物，大美自在** see the being with equanimity, the beauty has been already there

4. Give love to those with you

**己所欲，施于人** give the things that you like to others in community

5. What life is there, belongs

**什麼是生命，歸屬** come back / return to family / home

6. If you are great in number, do less

**窮則思變** thinking about changes when it is in extreme situation

7. More sharing - more alive, more connected

**分享帶來生命力** sharing bring life

8. Learn by soft-action, soft-looking

**輕柔行動中學習，細緻觀察中學習** lightly / slowly / gently learn in motion / movement action; delicately / carefully, learn in observation

9. Allow the change to be to be

**讓自然發生** let the dynamic nature happening

(Translations by He Longxiang, 2015)

Rather than analyzing the unique and interesting changes that have occurred through the process of translating the Nine Precepts into Chinese, and then back into English, I'd like to invite the reader to compare the meanings of the two versions of the text for themselves. Personally I find Longxiang's translations of the Nine Precepts poetic, beautiful, and somewhat mysterious. In some small way they point to a different world view created perhaps in part by a character-based

form of written language. The differences in meaning between his translation of the text and mine cause me to reflect upon my writing and the meaning I was trying to convey. Without a doubt, keeping the text open to interpretation has increased the meaning of the text. As Bortoft writes: "...the work becomes itself more fully with each manifestation - we could say that the meaning of the work 'grows' with interpretation in different contexts- so that the work's reality is increased with each event of understanding" (*loc.* 2742). Here, Bortoft points out, we can experience the coming-into-being in our understanding of the text. As in Sabbadini's *Tao Te Ching*, the variations in translations of the text that he provides do not lessen its value, but rather allow the text to be a living cultural vessel that is able to accommodate multiple meanings.

### The Future of the Nine Precepts

The Nine Precepts of Gentle-Doing is a small gesture toward creating a cultural vessel that might hold meaning for some. I have played with leaving its meaning open and able to change with the spirit of the times. I have tried to create something that might endure, something that might be interesting to others with different perspectives on the world. If I have understood something about the Tao, the concept of wu-wei and the culture and times in which I live, perhaps the Nine Precepts could be used to make a gentle adjustment to the way in which we, as human animals, live with others.

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