

The Eastern Wisdom in Gene Logsdon's *Gene Everlasting: A Contrary Farmer's Thoughts on Living Forever*

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Gene Logsdon (1931-2016) was a prominent American rural writer who dedicated his career to chronicling agrarian life. His seminal work, *Gene Everlasting: A Contrary Farmer's Thoughts on Living Forever*, demonstrates a remarkable assimilation and practical application of Eastern philosophical wisdom through vivid depictions and profound reflections on farming life. By examining the correspondence between the book's perspectives on nature, life and death and practice with Taoist thought, this study reveals the practical value of Eastern wisdom in addressing ecological crises and spiritual challenges in contemporary American society. It also offers fresh insights into pursuing harmonious human-nature coexistence and cultivating a rational attitude toward life and death in the postmodern era.

Keywords: *Gene Everlasting: A Contrary Farmer's Thoughts on Living Forever*, Gene Logsdon, oriental wisdom

Introduction

Gene Logsdon (1931-2016) rooted himself in farming practice and meticulous observation of nature for decades, forging his life philosophy through sustained engagement with the land. After being diagnosed with cancer in later years, he embarked on a profound inquiry into the essence of life, gradually developing a unique understanding through practical exploration, ultimately completing *The Farmer's Philosophy*. Through his observations, he discovered that the succession of pastures, the withering and flourishing of plants, and the life and death of animals do not follow a linear trajectory of "beginning and end" but rather an unceasing cycle. Death is merely a transformation of life's form and all things ultimately achieve immortality within the food chain. However, these insights stood in contrast to the abstract concepts of "eternity" and "infinity" in Western culture, as well as the underlying logic of religious "divine creation" and scientific "causal tracing". When he felt exhilarated by these "new discoveries", he was surprised to find that such ideas had long been recorded in Taoist classics of ancient China. He wrote in the book:

Standing on that Indian mound in my little valley, I thought I had come up with a new idea about the "meaning of everything", only to discover that it had already been stated in Taoism, at least six hundred years before Christianity even appeared. (Logsdon, 2016, p. 8)

He admitted that he had never delved into Taoist classics before, yet through his dialogue with nature, he independently arrived at a philosophical dimension resonant with the Taoist concepts of "material immortality" and "the cycle of life and death". This intellectual convergence across time and space further consolidated his conviction in his own thinking.

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Recognizing the resonance between his own thoughts and Taoist wisdom, Logsdon began to consciously revisit this Eastern ideological system and integrate it deeply into his understanding of life and his construction of a comprehensive view on life and death. Facing cancer, he “began to understand what Taoism describes as ‘the cycle of life and death’, just like the changing of seasons—death is merely another stage of life” (Logsdon, 2016, p. 45). He likened his illness to a fallow period on a farm: Just as land needs to be left uncultivated to restore its fertility, life also requires a period of adjustment to achieve self-renewal. He regarded cancer cells as “decomposers” in the soil: “They are breaking down my body, just as earthworms break down fallen leaves, providing nourishment for new life”. This cognition represents a concrete interpretation of Taoist ideas such as “aligning with the laws of nature” and “life and death sharing the same origin”. The Farmer’s Philosophy invites readers to reconsider the “wisdom of love” embedded in the life of the land.

Logsdon’s philosophical thought is not merely a passive reception of Eastern ideas, but rather an active alignment with and deep internalization of these concepts through his own practice. This process enabled his reflections on nature, life, and death to transcend the limitations of Western individualism, revealing a profound resonance with—and underpinning of—Eastern wisdom that bridges cultural divides.

The View of Nature: Abiding by the Dao and Symbiotic Coexistence With Nature

Logsdon’s view of nature takes the Taoist core ideas of “following nature” (Dao fa ziran) and the “unity of heaven and humanity” (tian ren he yi) as its ideological foundation. Its central tenet is to realize enduring human-nature coexistence by aligning with natural rhythms, respecting ecological symbiosis, and abandoning the obsession with transforming nature. This philosophy also became his core principle in resisting modern utilitarian farming models.

Logsdon’s reverence for the natural law of “mutual generation of life and death and spontaneous evolution” resonates deeply with the Taoist wisdom of self-generating evolution and interdependent coexistence (du hua er xiang yin). In “On the Equality of All Things” from Zhuangzi, the text proposes the idea of self-generating evolution and interdependent coexistence, suggesting that all things evolve independently in accordance with their own nature. Though seemingly separate from one another, they interdepend and complement each other invisibly without the need for forced external intervention. Logsdon took his farm as an experimental site and observed the growth of ash trees: Ash trees withered due to infestation by the emerald ash borer¹, yet a multitude of seedlings naturally sprouted beside the dead trees. Meanwhile, the pest population plummeted due to the loss of mature host trees, allowing the young trees to gain sufficient space for growth (Logsdon, 2016, p. 13). This precisely corresponds to the Taoist concept of self-generating evolution and interdependent coexistence—all things evolve independently, forming a symbiotic network invisibly without forced external regulation.

His view of nature also defines the core responsibility of farmers: Farmers ought not to focus solely on grain output, but to respect and safeguard nature, employing modern tools moderately in accordance with natural laws instead of blindly upholding technological supremacy. He criticizes the overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in modern farming for the sake of high yields, arguing that such purposeful intervention (youwei) running counter to natural laws will inevitably result in soil compaction, the death of soil microbes, and the disruption of food chains. “We think we are ‘optimizing’ agriculture, but in fact we are turning farms into soulless

¹ Emerald ash borer (*Agrilus planipennis*), also known as the ash borer, is a wood-boring pest that specifically infests ash trees. It disrupts the nutrient transport tissues of the trees, causing ash trees to wither and die. Its survival and reproduction are highly dependent on host plants such as ash trees.

production machines” (Logsdon, 2016, p. 52). This is essentially a reflection of the mindset of conquering nature prevalent in modern industrial civilization, and such behaviors will ultimately rebound on humans by undermining nature’s self-regulating capacity.

The Taoist wisdom of following nature elevates Logsdon’s observations of nature beyond the ecological level to a spiritual epiphany, which becomes an important support for his confrontations with life and death. During the intervals of chemotherapy, Logsdon’s meticulous observation in his black raspberry patch brought him a profound insight:

When raspberries bloom, bees, bumblebees, forest moths, red-spotted purples, and metallic bees visit in turn. They sip nectar and inadvertently pollinate—I had worried about pollination crises due to bee decline, but I discovered that the insect family is vast, and the pollination function has never ceased. (Logsdon, 2016, pp. 14-16)

This observation eased his anxiety over ecological crises and his own illness, leading him to the epiphany that “nature is more resilient than we imagine; its adaptive ingenuity far outstrips our anxious predictions” (Logsdon, 2016, p. 58). From the transition of ash trees from withering to the sprouting of new seedlings, he more truly understood the essence that “death is not an end but a transformation of life’s form”. In his practices such as “not forcing sheep to cross a river if they don’t want to, and not mowing the lawn unless necessary” (Logsdon, 2016, p. 72), he let go of the obsession with “transforming nature”, found his true self in the process of aligning with natural laws, and comprehended the essential laws of life and nature. This is precisely the core connotation of the Taoist concept of “grasping the Dao through intuitive observation and practical experience” (mu ji er dao cun).

Logsdon skillfully integrated the Taoist concept of the unity of heaven and humanity into his ecological wisdom, elevating it to serve as the foundation for the survival of human society as a whole. This view holds that humans are not external observers or conquerors of nature, but exist as an integral part of it, coexisting harmoniously with the natural world. Humans and nature are essentially of the same origin and interdependent with their survival closely linked. This Eastern wisdom is most vividly evidenced in Logsdon’s decades of farm practice. On his farm, killdeer feign injury to protect their nests, bees perform dances to indicate nectar sources, and soil microbes decompose organic matter—each form of life maintains ecological balance in its unique way. “Every life is a cog in this system; without any one of them, it wouldn’t work” (Logsdon, 2016, p. 38).

The root of ecological crises in modern society lies in humanity’s forgetting of this essential connection with nature: Unrestrained urban expansion encroaching on farmland, industrial wastewater and exhaust polluting the environment, and overconsumption leading to resource depletion are all inevitable consequences of violating the principle of “following nature” (Dao fa ziran). He cited the food chain on his farm to illustrate ecological interconnection: “Hawks eat snakes, snakes eat mice, and mice eat crops. Without hawks, mice will multiply in large numbers, and crop yields will drop—humans are also a link in this chain; damaging any link will ultimately backfire on us” (Logsdon, 2016, p. 105). Accordingly, he managed his farm in accordance with the Taoist principle of wuwei governance—acting in accordance with nature without arbitrary intervention. He did not deliberately remove weeds that improve soil quality, plainly stating that “weeds are not enemies; they are ‘soil doctors’ sent by nature” (Logsdon, 2016, p. 76). He followed the solar terms for planting and harvesting, “Don’t plant too early in spring or harvest too late in autumn; follow the pace of the sun, and the land will reward you with a good harvest” (Logsdon, 2016, p. 83). Under this view of nature, his farm has always maintained vigorous vitality, forming a sharp contrast with the degraded land surrounding it under modern farming practices.

He demonstrated through practice that nature possesses not only instrumental value but also intrinsic value; it is not merely a resource for humans, but an end in itself (Rolston, 2000, pp. 147, 213). Only by abandoning the arrogance of conquering nature and living in symbiotic coexistence with nature can human civilization achieve truly sustainable development.

The View of Life and Death: Cyclical Transformation and Renewal

Taoist thought holds that life and death are morphological transformations in the natural cycle, without absolute beginning or end. And it advocates accepting impermanence while breaking away from obsessions. The onset of cancer prompted Logsdon to confront life and death directly. No longer confined to the one-sided religious and technological discourses prevalent in the West, he found the answer in the Taoist concept of “birth entails death and death gives rise to birth” (fang sheng fang si, fang si fang sheng)—death is not an end, but the beginning of the cyclical transformation and renewal of life.

Faced with the sudden approach of death, Logsdon did not choose to avoid it, but derived a natural view of life and death from the phenomena of “the cycle of life” on his farm—the killdeer at his mother’s grave, the material transformation in the food chain. Taking the Taoist concept of “material immortality” as a starting point and integrating the specific life phenomena observed on the farm, he deeply grasped the Eastern philosophical concept of the oneness of life and death (sheng si qi yi), transforming abstract philosophical ideas into concrete understanding. The concept of “birth entails death and death gives rise to birth” proposed in “On the Equality of All Things” from Zhuangzi articulates the natural law governing the cycle of life and death: There is no absolute boundary between life and death. From the moment of birth, life moves toward natural demise; yet death is not the complete annihilation of life, but the beginning of new life. Both are merely morphological changes following natural law. By observing the birth, aging, illness, and death of animals and the withering and flourishing of plants, he gradually realized that humanity’s fear of death does not arise from death itself, but from ignorance of impermanence—just as people fear darkness not for its essence, but for the unknown things it conceals.

Death is never the endpoint of life, but an inevitable link in the natural cycle. Drawing on the Taoist concept of “material immortality”, Logsdon articulated the original insight that “all things achieve immortality through the food chain”—the physical body of an individual will eventually perish, but the genes, energy, and forms that constitute life will continue to exist in another way. Death is not an end, but the beginning of the “eternal renewal” of life within the food chain. All things in the world complete their morphological transformation in this cycle, living on endlessly.

The discovery of newly hatched killdeer was a pivotal moment for Logsdon to comprehend the Taoist concept of “material immortality”. He observed at his mother’s grave that “a killdeer was incubating its eggs. As I approached, the bird flew off with flapping wings, screeching to protect its young and feigning injury to lure me away” (Logsdon, 2016, p. 24). This scene brought him an epiphany, “My mother’s spirit had not vanished; it was screaming to protect everything under heaven and earth, turning her grave into a green cradle of life” (Logsdon, 2016, pp. 26-27). His mother’s passing miraculously nourished a patch of land and gave birth to the new life of killdeer. This recognition that “death breeds new life” connects with the Zhuangzi metaphor of “life and death are like the alternation of day and night” from “The Great and Venerable Teacher”: Day and night are not opposites, but different stages of a single day; similarly, life and death are not separate, but different forms of life, both interdependent in the natural cycle.

Later, Logsdon planted parsnips in his garden. A February frost subtly removed the bitterness from their roots, and when dug up, each piece yielded the freshest flavor of the new year. He wrote in the book: "This was the last fragile thread connecting her soul to mine, linking the departed past with the emerging future" (Logsdon, 2016, pp. 89-90). The parsnips survived the "dormancy" of the harsh winter and regained vitality in spring, just as his mother's life had never truly faded away—death is merely a continuation in another form. The cycle of withering and flourishing of this plant serves as a tender meditation on the flow of life, transforming the abstract Taoist philosophical concepts of the oneness of life and death and "birth entails death, and death gives rise to birth" into tangible reality on the farm, endowing ancient Eastern wisdom with a profoundly human dimension.

Logsdon rejected the Western religious promise of a "transcendent afterlife" and the technological fantasy of "mechanical immortality". He no longer clung to the illusion of "bodily immortality" and calmly accepted that "the body decomposes to nourish the land"; nor did he fear the emptiness of "the disappearance of consciousness", because "memories continue in the hearts of loved ones, and matter cycles in nature" (Logsdon, 2016, p. 146). This attitude aligns with the Taoist life proposition of "abiding by the natural order and accepting fate with equanimity, free from excessive joy and grief" (an shi chu shun, ai le bu ru). By aligning with natural rhythms and living in the present, one need not fear the birth and demise of the physical body. In the process of accepting life as it is, one can find the calm to confront life and death directly.

Logsdon ultimately overcame cancer, attributing his recovery to "comprehending life and death in the garden and letting go of fear". This demonstrates the power of the Taoist concept of "grasping the Dao through intuitive observation and practical experience": By comprehending the essence of the cyclical transformation and renewal of life through farming work, releasing the obsession with life and death, and aligning with the true nature of nature, one can achieve spiritual liberation. This liberation, rooted in the Taoist wisdom of aligning with natural laws and accepting impermanence, has become the core underpinning of Logsdon's *The Farmer's Philosophy*.

The View of Practice: Wu-Wei and Abiding by the Dao

Taoist view of practice advocates abandoning artificiality and aligning with one's inherent nature, calling for establishing a genuine connection with life through specific labor. Based on this Eastern wisdom, *The Farmer's Philosophy* provides practical enlightenment for breaking away from the dual challenges facing modern society: The land in the United States has become rapidly barren under the influence of chemical and mechanical farming (King, 2018, p. 189), falling into a predicament of soil compaction and ecological imbalance; individuals are constrained by the pursuit of extreme efficiency and plagued by spiritual anxiety caused by instrumental rationality. In response, Logsdon put forward a clear solution in the book—transforming the Taoist concept of wuwei governance and the calm view of life and death into actionable guidelines. He pointed out: "The earth could be a permanent garden, but we are preventing it from happening. Every year we tear apart the soil—that is the first step in stopping it from becoming a permanent garden" (Logsdon, 2016, p. 53). This reflection is precisely consistent with the wisdom of the "Old Man with the Water Jar" in Zhuangzi: When Zigong suggested that the old man use mechanical irrigation, the old man scoffed, arguing that "the use of machines will inevitably lead to crafty deeds and crafty deeds will inevitably give rise to a scheming mind". Craftiness will erode people's pure state of mind toward nature and disturb inner peace. Though living across different eras and regions, both of them share a highly consistent understanding of the harm posed by a "scheming mind" and utilitarian practice.

Logsdon's view of practice rejects chemical intervention and excessive mechanization, not because he does not understand efficiency, but because he refuses to let vain and utilitarian desires for "pursuing high yields" and "saving trouble" disrupt the land's inherent rhythm. For example, when growing tomatoes, he never erected tall stakes to force vines into upright growth and fruits into neat arrangement as commercial growers do; instead, he allowed the vines to sprawl naturally across the ground. Even if some tomatoes were shaded by leaves, growing more slowly or taking on irregular shapes, he considered this the original appearance of tomatoes—without traces of artificial modification, each fruit bearing the natural texture of the land. His practices of hand-weeding and using manure instead of chemical fertilizers, though seemingly "clumsy", actually remove the "artificiality" imposed on the land by modern agriculture: not forcibly changing the composition of the soil, not forcing crops to grow according to human standards, and letting everything return to its simplest state.

Logsdon regarded every act of sowing and harvesting as an equal dialogue with nature, rather than mechanical conquest of the land. This practice of respecting nature not only preserves the pure relationship between humans and the land, but also provides a new path for alleviating the anxiety caused by the "scheming mind" in modern society. It "prompts people to rethink the 'wisdom of love' in the life of the land" (Peng & Zhou, 2020). As long as we no longer cling to using "more advanced" technologies to "modify" nature and pursue more perfect results, we can, like Logsdon, gain down-to-earth peace from the land. Therefore, *The Farmer's Philosophy* is not an abstract theory, but a set of actionable guidelines. When modern society falls into the obsession with "conquering nature" and "pursuing extreme efficiency", returning to the simple wisdom of "aligning with the laws of nature" provides a dual breakthrough for the sustainable development of agriculture and the spiritual salvation of individuals.

Conclusion

Using farming practice as the medium, Logsdon transforms the essence of Eastern wisdom into practical and actionable solutions for addressing modern ecological and spiritual challenges. At the level of the view of nature, Logsdon rejected excessive mechanization and respected the natural growth of crops throughout the farming process. This reverence for and adherence to nature provides a replicable practical model for addressing current ecological problems such as soil degradation and species loss, fully embodying the Taoist view of nature centered on abiding by the Dao and symbiotic coexistence with nature. In terms of the view of life and death, he reconstructed the stereotyped understanding of death and offered a perspective featuring cyclical transformation and renewal for people generally plagued by anxiety about life and death in modern society. At the level of the view of practice, he abandoned the utilitarian supremacy of efficiency and chose the practical attitude of wuwei and abiding by the Dao, revealing that "aligning with the laws of nature" is the path to achieving a pure state of mind.

Logsdon's theoretical expression transforms traditional Eastern wisdom from abstract theory into concrete and feasible practical paths, enabling ancient Eastern thought to demonstrate vivid theoretical explanatory power and practical vitality in responding to global contemporary issues. This not only provides an academic reference for modern society to understand and practice the contemporary value of Eastern wisdom, but also promotes dialogue and cultural mutual learning between Eastern and Western ecological and life philosophies.

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