DOI: 10.53469/jssh.2025.7(04).08

Zen Buddhism and the Ecology of Interdependence: Zen Aesthetics and Ecological Vision in Peter Matthiessen's Nature Writing

Yanhua Cai[1,2]

[1]School of Foreign Languages, Tongji University1, Shanghai, 200092, China
[2]School of Foreign Languages, Yancheng Teachers' College, Yancheng, 224000, China
Correspondence Author

Abstract: ***The 20th century has witnessed an increasing number of American writers turning to Eastern philosophy, especially Zen Buddhism, to reflect human relationships with nature. Known as the "Oriental turn", this shift can be seen clearly in the work of Peter Matthiessen, who didn't just borrow Zen ideas but adopted them in his writings and observations of the world. This article examines the profound influence of Zen Buddhist philosophy on Peter Matthiessen's environmental writings. Adopting a comparative literature approach grounded in influence studies, the paper explores the intersections between Matthiessen's literary style and key tenets of Zen thought. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions: linguistic expression, character construction, and ecological imagery. Close readings of representative works demonstrate how Zen principles—such as intuitive perception, non-duality, impermanence, and reverence for nature—are seamlessly woven into Matthiessen's ecological vision. These elements coalesce to form a distinctive literary paradigm that bridges spiritual awareness with environmental ethics, offering a model of ecological writing rooted in contemplative insight and interdependence.***

Keywords: Peter Matthiessen, Zen Buddhism, Literary ecology, Environmental writing, non-duality.

1. Introduction

Peter Matthiessen is widely recognized as one of the most important voices in American environmental writing and spiritual thought in the twentieth century. Matthiessen's literary evolution reads like a pilgrimage: his early works, grounded in the gritty textures of American realism, gradually shed their narrative armor as Zen Buddhism reshaped his vision. After his turn to Zen practice after the 1970s, his writings began to breathe differently, slower, quieter, attuned to the spaces between words.

Zen themes in Matthiessen's work have gained increasing attention. Take *The Snow Leopard* (1978) for example, Critics point out that as Matthiessen travels through the Himalayas, he also goes on an inner journey—exploring both the natural world and his sense of self. This journey, shaped by a Zen outlook, becomes a way for him to reflect on American culture and the environmental crises of his time (Lyon, 1979; Aton, 1981). In a 1989 interview, Kay Bonetti also emphasized how Zen practice deeply changed Matthiessen's view of life and writing, making Zen the spiritual foundation of much of his work.

Later studies have examined Matthiessen's work from both his fiction and nonfiction. William Dowie (1991) offered a detailed analysis of his novels, while McKay Jenkins (2000) focused on the environmental values in his nonfiction writing. Stephanie Kaza (2000) and Shin Yamashiro (2003) point to *The Snow Leopard*'s rejection of human-centered thinking. They also connect these insights to broader conversations in environmental ethics. Similarly, Nelson (2005) and Intaek Oh (2005, 2010) argue that Matthiessen uses Zen to challenge the either-or thinking of Western modernity, such as separating human from nature or self from other, and instead builds a vision based on authenticity, balance, and ecological interconnection. Johnston (2015) shows how Zen becomes a moral and philosophical tool for exploring themes like religious diversity, spiritual healing, and the weight of historical trauma. Thus, at a time of eco-crisis, his work gives us new ways to think about the relationship between humans and the natural world, and to imagine a more compassionate, connected future. Studying Zen in Matthiessen's work, then, isn't just a literary project—it's a meaningful response to the urgent ecological and spiritual challenges we face today.

2. Matthiessen's Ecological Vision

Peter Matthiessen's strong connection to nature began early in life and left a lasting mark on his writing. His father, Erard Matthiessen, was an architect and once served in the U.S. Navy during World War II. After the war, he turned his attention to environmental causes, becoming an active supporter and fundraiser for groups like the Audubon Society and The Nature Conservancy. Growing up with a father so deeply involved in conservation quietly shaped Matthiessen's outlook and helped lay the foundation for his lifelong interest in the natural world.

Though the Matthiessen family's home was in New York's bustling streets, their frequent retreats to Connecticut's forests carved a primal intimacy with the wild into Peter's childhood. Those summers among oak and maple—where sunlight fell in puzzle pieces through the canopy—were his first classrooms. He and his brother prowled the underbrush, turning over logs to study garter snakes, tracking warblers through the trees, their curiosity sharpened by mud-stained knees and scraped palms. While his brother channeled this wonder into marine biology, Matthiessen carried those woods into language.

As an adult, Matthiessen traveled widely, exploring regions as varied as the heart of Asia, the plains of Africa, the Australian outback, and the icy wilderness of Antarctica. Because of this, he has been described as "the Thoreau of Africa, South

America, the Himalaya, and the wide, wild sea" (Tredinnick, 2005: 104).

Matthiessen's writing does more than paint detailed pictures of the natural world—it asks deep questions about how we live within it. Nature, in his work, is never just a backdrop. It's alive, aware, and filled with meaning. Through vivid imagery, he communicates spiritual truths and ethical concerns, always emphasizing the deep connections between all living things. Every element in an ecosystem matter, and when that balance is broken, the consequences ripple outward. For him, true sustainability isn't just about protecting the environment—it's about realizing that we are part of nature, not separate from or above it.

While Matthiessen's ecological vision is firmly grounded in deep respect for the natural world and a clear rejection of human-centered thinking, his works also reveal a growing spiritual depth closely tied to his Zen practice. From the late 1960s onward, his study of Zen Buddhism began to reshape not only how he viewed the world but also how he wrote. Zen offered more than just a space for reflection—it changed the way he understood knowledge, ethics, and the purpose of writing about nature. As a result, his work began to blend careful environmental observation with spiritual insight, creating a unique form of eco-spiritual writing that is both deeply personal and powerfully expressive.

3. The Zen Buddhist Elements in Matthiessen's Ecological Writing

Matthiessen's work doesn't just *mention* Zen—it pulses with it, reshaping how we think about nature writing. His prose moves with the quiet rhythm of meditation, his characters bump up against the myth of human superiority, and his landscapes blur the line between poetry and pure, unfiltered truth. This isn't philosophy as decoration; it's a gut-level call to see the world differently. Take his characters: they're not heroes giving speeches, but ordinary folks (and sometimes clouds or rivers) that whisper Zen's big ideas—like how everything's connected, and how we're not the center of the universe. By diving into his stripped-down style, we'll see how Matthiessen doesn't just *talk* about saving nature. He makes you feel, word by word, that you are part of it—and that's where real change begins.

3.1 Language as Intuitive Insight: Zen Thought in Matthiessen's Poetic Expression

When Peter Matthiessen took up Zen Buddhism, his writing began to shift. He ditched the West's analytical playbook, trading thesis statements for intuition and raw experience—a style that channeled East Asia's heartbeat. Under the guidance of early Zen teachers, he poured his spiritual cracks-of-light into haiku: three lines, seventeen syllables, sharp as a monk's breath. No sprawling metaphors, just vivid snapshots—a heron's shadow on water, frost melting at dawn—seizing those blink-and-you-miss-it moments where the world whispers its truths. One especially moving example comes from a haiku he wrote not long after his wife's death, during a meditation retreat led by Zen teacher Roshi Eido Shimano: *Owl on a snow-thick limb / shifting soft feathers. / Snow falls on snow*. (Matthiessen, 1985: 48)

This haiku was not carefully planned—it came to Matthiessen spontaneously as he walked through the forest near his wife's memorial after a meditation session. The quiet image of the owl perched on a branch, feathers shifting softly as snow falls, holds both emotional weight and stillness. It evokes a sense of death's silence, but also the gentle, ongoing rhythm of life. In that moment, nature's transience becomes a kind of teacher, offering insight without explanation, much like Zen's idea of "wordless realization." For Matthiessen, writing haiku wasn't just a nod to Japanese poetic form—it was part of his spiritual practice, shaped by the discipline and awareness he cultivated through Zen. It was a deeply lived practice shaped by his Zen training. The phrase "snow falls on snow" doesn't just describe the scene—it also hints at layers of grief and memory, gently building one upon the other. In this way, the poem reflects the Zen idea of "seeing through scenery," were outer landscapes mirror inner awareness.

More broadly, Matthiessen wove poetic rhythm and Zen-influenced syntax into much of his nonfiction. His writing often shifts between vivid description and quiet reflection, not to build an argument, but to lead readers toward a deeper sense of awareness. In *The Tree Where Man Was Born*, for example, he opens with the following passage:

"In the time when Den did created all things, He created the sun, And the sun is born, and dies, and comes again. He created the moon, And the moon is born, and dies, and comes again; He created the stars, He created man, And man is born, and dies, and does not come again." (Matthiessen, 1972: 1)

While this passage isn't a poem in the strict sense, it carries a strong poetic rhythm and a three-part structure that reflects the cyclical flow of natural time. The calm repetition of birth, death, and return—first applied to the sun, moon, and stars—sets a steady pattern, which is then suddenly broken by the final line. With the phrase "and does not come again," humanity is singled out, disrupting the rhythm and introducing a sharp sense of existential disconnection. This break acts like a linguistic *kōan*—a sudden shift that interrupts familiar ways of thinking and invites deeper reflection. In this way, the structure of the passage mirrors the Zen practice of *kihō*, where unexpected or paradoxical language is used to provoke insight or awakening.

3.2 The Buddha-Nature in Character Construction

If Matthiessen's language reflects a Zen-inspired way of expressing intuitive thought, then his portrayal of characters brings Buddhist ideas to life at the narrative level. His depictions of people, whether fictional or drawn from real experience, often go beyond traditional psychological realism. Instead, they take on symbolic or spiritual dimensions, pointing to deeper states of being shaped by Zen thinking. This is especially clear in *The Snow Leopard*, where the narrative moves between two worlds: the physical journey through the Himalayas and the inner journey of spiritual search. Within this structure, characters like the Sherpa guide Tukten are more than travel companions—they embody elements of Buddhist wisdom. At the same time, Matthiessen presents himself as a character undergoing a quiet but profound inner transformation, one that mirrors the shifting landscape around him.

(1) Transcendence in the Mundane: Tukten as a Manifestation of Buddha-Nature

In *The Snow Leopard*, Peter Matthiessen's Buddhist perspective comes through most clearly in the character of Tukten, the mysterious Sherpa guide. Though he appears to be a humble, socially marginal figure, Tukten consistently shows a calm spiritual presence that rises above typical moral judgments and emotional attachments. Throughout the book, Matthiessen describes him using a range of meaningful Buddhist terms—calling him "Kasapa" (*The Snow Leopard*, 1978: 28), a "wanderer or evil monk, or saint or sorcerer" (ibid.: 85), "*repa*" (ibid.: 307), and even a "true bodhisattva" (ibid.: 313). These descriptions build Tukten into more than just a supporting character—he becomes a key symbol of Buddhist insight and one of the most spiritually resonant figures in the narrative.

Matthiessen's portrayal of Tukten is deeply layered with Buddhist language and symbolic meaning, giving the character both spiritual depth and philosophical complexity. In a key moment, Matthiessen observes, *"That enigmatic smile had the quality of Mahākāśyapa… Perceiving in this emblematic gesture the unified nature of existence, Kasapa smiled"* (ibid.: 28). This reference recalls the famous Zen story of the Flower Sermon, where the Buddha silently holds up a lotus flower and Mahākāśyapa responds with a knowing smile—an act that marks the beginning of Zen's tradition of wordless, mind-to-mind transmission. By linking Tukten to Mahākāśyapa, Matthiessen presents him as a figure of quiet, intuitive wisdom—someone whose presence communicates truths that go beyond what words can express.

At another point in the narrative, Tukten is compared to a *nyönpa*, a Tibetan "mad saint" whose strange or socially transgressive behavior hides a deeper spiritual realization. This figure echoes Zen's tradition of eccentric sages—often called "wild foxes" or "dharma clowns"—whose unconventional actions are meant to shake people out of rigid thinking and open the path to awakening. In a moment of quiet clarity, Matthiessen writes: *"he regards me with that Bodhisattva smile that would shine impartially on rape or resurrection—this is the gaze that he shares with the wild animals"* (ibid.: 242). This "bodhisattva's smile" becomes a powerful symbol of non-dual awareness—the kind of insight that holds opposites together without needing to resolve or separate them. It's a moment that captures a central aspect of Zen: the ability to see through contradiction and remain present with what is.

Even the phrase "evil monk," which might sound harsh at first, holds spiritual meaning in the context of Chan and Zen traditions. In these lineages, figures who defy conventional behavior often become unlikely sources of wisdom. Tukten's moral ambiguity—his quiet refusal to get caught up in drama or hold grudges—doesn't suggest a lack of ethics, but rather a deep freedom from attachment. As Matthiessen reflects, *"how can he forgive me, when he hadn't bothered with resentment in the first place?"* (ibid.: 307). It's in this kind of detachment—not coldness, but clarity—that Zen's teachings quietly take form. This emotional balance doesn't reflect cold detachment in the Western sense, but rather the Zen concept of *wu nian*—or "no-thought"—in which the mind no longer clings to fixed ideas or opposites. Tukten's steady presence reflects this ideal: a state of being that moves through the world without resistance, judgment, or grasping.

In the end, Tukten takes on the role of a *repa*—a lay practitioner who lives fully in the world without being bound by it. He embodies the Zen idea of "transcendence within immanence," where freedom isn't found by stepping away from life, but by being deeply present within it. In this sense, Tukten is more than just a guide through the Himalayas; he becomes a kind of spiritual mirror, silently challenging both Matthiessen and the reader to reflect on the nature of wisdom, identity, and awakening.

Tukten is more than a guide—he becomes a quiet spiritual companion in Matthiessen's search for meaning. Though he might seem ordinary at first, there's something steady and clear in the way he moves through the world. Without giving advice or offering explanations, he shows a kind of calm awareness that affects those around him. In this way, he reflects the Zen idea of learning not through words, but through presence. Tukten isn't just a character shaped by Buddhist ideas—he *embodies* them, allowing Matthiessen and the reader to feel what Zen looks like in real life. Through him, Matthiessen deepens the spiritual layer of his nature writing, blending inner reflection with the wild, living world around him.

(2) Struggle and Sudden Insight: Matthiessen's Path of Spiritual Practice

If Tukten represents an outward expression of Buddha-nature, then Matthiessen stands as the seeker, the practitioner who moves between grief and clarity, between confusion and brief moments of awakening. On the surface, *The Snow Leopard* feels like a rugged adventure story, packed with scientific observations and vivid descriptions of mountains and valleys. But dig deeper, and it's really about grief, healing, and stumbling toward peace. Matthiessen's journey isn't just about tracking a rare animal; it's about grappling with Buddhist ideas about inner peace while carrying heavy emotional baggage. He's reeling from his wife's recent death, worried about his kids, and wrestling with his flaws. His diary-like entries don't hide his doubts or loneliness—he's not some wise guru, just a guy trying to make sense of life's messiness. Through blistered feet and freezing nights, the book becomes a raw, honest look at what it means to live (and hurt) in a world where everything—joy, pain, even mountains—is always changing.

In the vast, snow-covered silence of the Himalayas, Matthiessen begins to surrender his attachments by engaging in quiet dialogue with the natural world. One key moment, recorded during the northward journey, encapsulates this encounter:

"I wait, facing the north; instinct tells me to stand absolutely still. Cloud mist, snow, and utter silence, utter solitude: extinction. Then, in the great hush, the clouds draw apart, revealing the vast Dhaulagiri snowfields. I breathe, mists swirl, and all has vanished-nothing! I make a small, involuntary bow." (ibid.: 74)

This moment captures a quiet but profound sense of letting go. Surrounded by cloud, mist, snow, and silence, Matthiessen finds himself in a scene that echoes the Zen idea of *śūnyatā*—emptiness not as absence, but as a living, open ground of being. His bow, offered without planning or thought, doesn't come from the mind—it rises from the body, instinctive and sincere. It's a response to *tathatā*, the "suchness" of things just as they are. In that brief gesture, the ego slips away, and what's left is a simple act of reverence—a quiet recognition of being part of something far greater.

Importantly, this moment of clarity is not a lasting state. When Matthiessen later returns to the same mountain pass, the stillness he once experienced gives way to confusion and sensory overwhelm: *"But what I see in this first impression is a chaos of bright spires, utterly lifeless, without smoke or track or hut or passing bird."* (ibid.: 172). The sharp contrast between the two moments reflects a key insight from Zen—that awakening isn't something you build up to or hold on to. It comes, if at all, as a sudden break in ordinary perception, not as the result of effort or intention. The "nothing" he once glimpsed can't be forced or returned to; its truth lies in how fleeting and ungraspable it is.

This movement between clarity and confusion reflects the Zen idea of *furyū monji*— "not relying on words or letters." In this view, truth can't be fully grasped through logic or step-by-step thinking; it must be experienced directly, through intuition. Matthiessen's writing follows this rhythm, flowing between moments of insight and emptiness. In doing so, it gently reminds both the writer and the reader that enlightenment isn't a fixed goal to reach, but something that unfolds slowly and uncertainly, always in motion.

Throughout the journey, Matthiessen tries to capture his inner experience through writing, reflecting on the *Heart Sūtra*, the Four Noble Truths, and past conversations with his Zen teachers, Roshi Eido and Roshi Soen. Yet he admits that even these reflections are tied up with ego, what Buddhism calls *ātmagrāha* or clinging to the self. On the summit of Crystal Mountain, he writes:

"I understand all this, not in my mind but in my heart, knowing how meaningless it is to try to capture what cannot be expressed, knowing that mere words will remain when I read it all again, another day." (ibid.: 212)

Despite his sincere effort to live out the Zen teaching that "form is emptiness, and emptiness is form," Matthiessen often runs up against the limits of language when trying to express the raw immediacy of experience. His Zen practice sharpens his sensitivity to the natural world, but he never claims to have reached full awakening or spiritual transcendence. Instead, he presents himself as someone still searching—deeply engaged, but always aware of the gap between insight and expression.

Instead, Matthiessen's narrative points to a kind of partial awakening—a liminal state where moments of clarity are woven with uncertainty and doubt. This tension gives his portrayal of Zen a sense of realism rather than mystical certainty. It doesn't present enlightenment as a final goal reached once and for all, but as an ongoing process—one that moves back and forth between insight and illusion. Rather than tracing a straight path toward spiritual mastery, Matthiessen offers a more honest picture of Zen practice: one shaped by humility and by the quiet, repeated act of returning to the path.

In this way, *The Snow Leopard* becomes more than just a piece of nature writing—it becomes a record of inner witnessing. Through the steady voice of "I," Matthiessen reveals a quiet shift from emotional attachment toward a kind of spiritual letting go. What he arrives at is not some ultimate truth, but something more grounded: a "mind of ordinary acceptance," known in Zen as *heijōshin*—the calm, unshaken heart. Moving from "being in the mountains" to "on the way home," he approaches the Zen paradox of "attaining by not attaining." The book, then, is not only a physical journey through wild landscapes but a meditative pilgrimage through the inner terrain of self, where deep ecological awareness and existential reflection merge.

3.3 The Appropriation of Buddhist Imagery

The Snow Leopard isn't a book that waves Buddhist symbols around like decorative props. Matthiessen doesn't just sprinkle Buddhist imagery into the story—he blends it into the writing itself, mirroring his gut-level grasp of Zen. Take something as simple as a character's "smile" or the way he describes clouds drifting across the sky. These aren't just pretty metaphors—they're quiet lessons on Zen's big ideas: how everything's connected, how nothing lasts, how some truths can't be nailed down with words. Matthiessen never treats Buddhism like some far-off, mysterious philosophy. Instead, it's sewn into his writing, showing up in the way a scene *feels* rather than what it *explains*.

Among the many recurring motifs in *The Snow Leopard*, the smile holds special cultural and spiritual weight. In the foundational Chan koan from *The Transmission of the Lamp* (*Wudeng Huiyuan*), the Buddha silently holds up a flower before his disciples, and only Mahākāśyapa responds with a smile—a gesture that is traditionally seen as the beginning of Zen's wordless transmission of wisdom. This simple, silent act—bypassing teachings and texts—stands as a powerful symbol of intuitive awakening. Matthiessen draws deeply from this tradition, returning again and again to quiet smiles as signs of spiritual presence and insight. He writes:

"The people smile—that is the greatest miracle of all… one delights in the smile of a blind girl being led, of a Hindu gentleman in white turban gazing benignly at the bus driver who reviles him, of a flute-playing beggar boy, of a slow old woman pouring holy water from Ganga, the River, onto a stone elephant daubed red." (ibid.: 12)

This passage *does* what it talks about: paying mindful attention to little, ordinary moments until they glow with quiet meaning. The smiles he describes—often from people society usually ignores—the quiet ones, the strugglers, the outsiders—show how strength and calm can hide inside pain. These aren't feel-good grins or pretty details; like Mahākāśyapa's famous smile, they're cracks letting light in—a flash of understanding no words can capture. Repeating "smile" does double duty: it's a rhythm, like a mantra, and a weight that sinks deeper each time. Matthiessen doesn't

overexploit these moments—no neat lessons or bullet points. He lets them breathe, stay open-ended, honoring Zen's stubborn refusal to box truth into theories. Meaning doesn't get handed to you here; it rises when you slow down and *feel* the words.

This motif reaches philosophical depth in Matthiessen's depiction of Tukten, the enigmatic Sherpa guide. His "bodhisattva smile"—directly linked to Mahākāśyapa's iconic gesture—communicates a serenity that holds both destruction and renewal without preference. As Matthiessen notes:

"Śākyamuni held up a single lotus flower and was silent. Perceiving in this emblematic gesture the unified nature of existence, Kasapa smiled." (ibid.: 28)

The reference to the Flower Sermon here is more than just a literary nod—it acts as a kind of spiritual invocation. By linking Tukten with Mahākāśyapa, Matthiessen presents him as a living *koan*—a figure whose silence and mystery are not barriers to insight, but the very ground from which understanding can arise. Tukten's smile, gentle and unknowable, reflects the Zen principle of *furyū monji*—wisdom passed through presence, not words. It's this quiet, embodied awareness that begins to shift Matthiessen's inner landscape. In encountering Tukten's smile, both the narrator and the reader are invited into the Zen view of awakening: not something to be seized through effort, but something to be glimpsed and received through stillness and attention.

The image of clouds is one of the most profoundly meaningful Zen metaphors in The Snow Leopard, along with the silent force of the human smile. It functions on multiple levels, representing transience, mirroring fluctuating internal feelings, and acting as a conduit for spiritual enlightenment. Clouds are frequently utilized in the Chan tradition to symbolize the transient nature of everything and the sage's serene, detached mentality. As Master Zhiqin writes, *"Green mountains, primordially unmoving; Floating clouds, unhindered in their coming and going"* (Puji, 1984: 240). In this imagery, clouds represent freedom from fixation and a mind that flows naturally with the rhythms of life. Matthiessen draws on this tradition and weaves it into his journey through the Himalayas, infusing the image with personal depth and spiritual meaning as he reflects on his process of letting go.

Early in the book, Matthiessen writes: *"All peaks are cloud-hidden, and just beneath the swirling clouds is a white stillness."* (Matthiessen, 1978: 48). This scene is more than a description of weather—it mirrors his inner state: full of grief, uncertainty, and emotional fog. Matthiessen's perception of spiritual clarity is affected by his recent bereavement and internal turmoil, much like clouds cover the summits of mountains. However, he starts to sense a calmness, a peaceful presence that suggests the possibility of change, underlying that whirling uncertainty. In this sense, the clouds represent more than just his emotional condition; they also have a deeper Zen significance, implying that genuine insight frequently arises from obscure moments. What appears obscure or perplexing could lead to understanding. Such a silent metamorphosis is captured by Matthiessen later in the journey:

"I wait, facing the north; instinct tells me to stand absolutely still. Cloud mist, snow, and utter silence, utter solitude: extinction. Then, in the great hush, the clouds draw apart, revealing the vast Dhaulagiri snowfields. I breathe, mists swirl, and all has vanished—nothing! I make a small, involuntary bow." (ibid.: 68)

This moment captures the heart of Zen cloud imagery: the idea that what hides can also reveal. When Dhaulagiri briefly appears through the mist, the view is more than just beautiful—it reflects the Zen teaching of *śūnyatā*, or emptiness, not as emptiness in the ordinary sense, but as something alive, always shifting, and impossible to pin down. The mountain shows itself, then vanishes again, illustrating the dance between form (*rupa*) and formlessness (*śūnya*)—between what we can see and what quietly slips beyond our grasp. Matthiessen's "involuntary bow" is a natural, unthinking gesture of reverence—not for the mountain itself, but for the fleeting moment of seeing, for the impermanence of perception. In this way, the cloud becomes a kind of teacher, reminding him—and us—that insight isn't found in what stays, but in what comes and goes without attachment.

In this way, clouds are more than just part of the landscape—they carry Zen teachings of their own. They're not simply background to the journey, but part of its inner path. Matthiessen comes to see that the clouds don't block the view—they *are* the view. They reflect the truth that wisdom doesn't come from cutting through illusion, but from seeing its impermanence for what it is. This realization gently shifts his focus from searching for final answers to simply being present. And it's this presence, shaped by everything that appears and disappears, that becomes the heart of his spiritual practice.

4. Interpreting the Ecological Dimension: Zen Ethics and the Reimagining of Nature

Peter Matthiessen's nature writing is deeply shaped by Zen Buddhist philosophy, which offers both a spiritual foundation and an ethical-aesthetic lens for rethinking the relationship between humans and the natural world. Core Zen principles—such as adapting to the rhythms of nature (*shuntian yingshi*), non-action (*wuwei*), egolessness (*wuwo*), and the equality of all living beings—are woven into his work as the basis for a powerful ecological ethic. Through these ideas, Matthiessen challenges Western anthropocentrism and offers a vision grounded in interdependence, humility, and mindful presence.

At the heart of Matthiessen's ecological vision is the Zen principle of *shuntian yingshi*—living in tune with the natural flow of things. This idea isn't about "harmony" as some vague ideal—it's about dancing to nature's beat instead of yanking the reins. In *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen roams the Himalayas like a meditation: no muscling his way up peaks, no charging after the snow leopard like a trophy. He pauses. Sits down in the snow. Let the mountains come to *him*. His writing about the landscape holds back, too—no glossy

adjectives elbowing in, just quiet awe. It's Zen's stubborn truth in action: the world knows how to heal itself, and human hands mostly get in the way. Matthiessen's restraint isn't weakness—it's trust.

This ties into Zen's idea of *wuwei*—not sitting back but trusting nature's flow. Matthiessen's *Far Tortuga* lives and breathes this. The book itself feels half-unwritten: jagged sentences, blank spaces where words should be, silence thick as fog. It reads like a Zen ink painting—what's *not* said matters as much as the brushstrokes. The story's sailors? They're all greed and grab, stripping the Caribbean of turtles until the ocean turns on them. No grand moralizing, just cold cause-and-effect: mess with nature's balance, and it messes back. Matthiessen's bare-bones style isn't just artsy—it's activism. By refusing to pretty things up, he shouts Zen's oldest lesson: take less, listen more.

The Zen teaching of egolessness (*wuwo*) also plays a key role in shaping Matthiessen's ecological vision. Matthiessen's work leans hard into Zen's idea of egolessness—ditching the "I" to see the world. In *The Snow Leopard*, humans aren't the heroes. Instead, the story hums with the lives of clouds that shift like restless ghosts, yaks trudging through snowdrifts, and rivers carving their ancient paths. These aren't just set pieces; they're *alive*, nudging the journey forward. It's Zen in action: the ego melts, and suddenly you're just another thread in nature's wild tapestry. Matthiessen doesn't *tell* you to connect with nature—he yanks you out of your human bubble until you feel the mountain's breath on your neck and the cold bite of a passing storm. Here, there's no "you" and "it." Just life, raw and unscripted.

The doctrine of the equality of all beings (*zhongsheng pingdeng*), as expanded in Chinese Chan Buddhism to include insentient entities such as rocks and plants, also finds expression in Matthiessen's work. In *The Snow Leopard*, he writes: "*In the serene and indiscriminate domesticity of these sunny villages, sow and piglet, cow and calf, mother and infant, hen and chicks, nanny and kid commingle in a common pulse of being*." (ibid.: 29). This image of converging life forms expresses a Zen-inspired vision of symbiotic resonance, where boundaries between species dissolve and all beings participate in a shared rhythm of existence. It is not hierarchy, but mutual presence, that defines the world.

Matthiessen's ecological ethic also shapes how he portrays human relationships. In his descriptions of the Himalayan porters, he doesn't reduce them to their function or role. Instead, he writes with genuine respect for their humility, quiet strength, and spiritual simplicity. He observes, *"their dignity is unassailable, for the service is rendered for its own sake—it is the task, not the employer, that is served"* (*The Snow Leopard*, 1978: 33). Here, work isn't just chores to check off—it's how you live. The porters' steady, unhurried rhythm mirrors karma yoga's "selfless action" and Buddhism's call to let go of ego. No flashy titles, no bossing others around—just hands doing what needs doing daily. Their quiet dignity, rooted in purpose over power, throws Western obsessions with status into sharp relief. It's a calm lesson: when you stop scrambling to be "above" others—or "above" nature—you start seeing your place in the bigger picture. Matthiessen doesn't hammer this home with sermons. He just shows these men, bent under loads, yet somehow lighter in spirit, and lets you ask: Why do we still think some lives matter more?

Matthiessen's ecological vision isn't just a critique—it's a deconstruction of the West's obsession with control. Think of the Bible's old edict to "rule over nature," or Descartes' mind-body split that treats the world like a machine to be mastered. Matthiessen throws a wrench in all that. Zen Buddhism, for him, flips the script: no hierarchies, no bosses. Here, Buddha-nature hums in every beetle, glacier, and blade of grass, and "dominion" isn't about conquest—it's about kinship. Matthiessen doesn't present this view as doctrine, but as an ethical stance—a literary and spiritual alternative to the human-centered thinking that has shaped much of modern life.

This vision culminates at a moment of profound simplicity on Crystal Mountain: "*I breathe, mists swirl, and all has vanished-nothing! I make a small, involuntary bow.*" (ibid.: 74) The act of bowing is not directed toward a deity, but toward emptiness itself—a gesture of *śūnyatā*, of reverence for the ungraspable nature of existence. It marks a Zen realization: that meaning arises not from control or understanding, but from surrender and attunement.

Ultimately, Matthiessen's ecological ethic is more than a call to protect the environment—it's a rethinking of what it means to exist. Grounded in Zen principles of attunement, non-interference, and egoless awareness, his writing blends spiritual insight with literary craft to offer a vision of deep ecological belonging. Rather than seeking control over nature, he invites a kind of mindful surrender—a way of being that values presence over power. In his work, language, form, and ecological consciousness come together to create a quiet, poetic space where the boundaries between self and world begin to dissolve.

5. Conclusion

Peter Matthiessen's nature writing, rooted in the quiet depth of Zen Buddhism, turns our usual view of the wild on its head. Drawing on Zen ideas—impermanence, interconnection, and the decentering of the self—he rejects the old story that puts humans in charge and nature in the background. Instead, he offers a humbler, more grounded way to live, listen more, and take less. This isn't just eco-activism—it's something deeper. Matthiessen doesn't tell us to save nature; he shows us that nature is already sacred, already speaking, if we're willing to hear it. A storm becomes a mirror. A mountain becomes a teacher.

Matthiessen's genius lies in turning Zen philosophy into something you *live*, not just think about. His bare-bones, haiku-sharp prose, especially in *The Snow Leopard*, doesn't just describe a mountain or a river; it blurs who's watching and what's watched until you're knee-deep in the moment. Take Tukten, the Sherpa guide: he isn't some wise old sage, but a guy who smiles a lot, says little, and somehow makes you rethink everything. Even the clouds and snowfields aren't just scenery. They're teachers in disguise, showing the world's here-today-gone-tomorrow beauty. Matthiessen

doesn't write about Zen—he lets it seep through the cracks, turning readers into participants, not spectators.

Matthiessen's ecological ethic isn't presented as a set of rules or solutions—it's more of an invitation to see differently. Through the lens of Zen's "everyday mind," he transforms ordinary moments—a spider spinning its web, a bird in flight—into quiet acts of reverence. He asks readers to find the sacred in the simple, to wake up to what's already around them. His gentle but clear critique of Western modernity's extractive mindset, placed alongside Indigenous and Zen-inspired models of harmony, points to a deeper truth: restoring ecological balance starts with recognizing that we are not separate from the natural world—we are part of its living fabric.

In a time marked by climate crisis and a deep sense of disconnection, Matthiessen's work feels more relevant than ever. His blending of ecological awareness and spiritual inquiry calls us to question the illusions of control and separateness, and instead follow a path of surrender, presence, and deep listening. Reading Matthiessen is like joining a pilgrimage, one that moves through Himalayan peaks and inner terrain alike, shaped by loss, stillness, and awakening. His journey shows us that caring for the Earth and seeking spiritual freedom are not separate pursuits, but part of the same movement, rooted in the quiet courage of seeing the world, and ourselves, just as they are.

Matthiessen's legacy rests in this powerful synthesis: a literary and ecological practice where Zen's radical vision of equality meets the untamed integrity of the natural world. In both his words and his silences, we are not given final answers, but something more enduring—an invitation. To bow, as he did in that "small, involuntary bow" to the vanishing mist, and to walk the Earth with reverence, for all that is fleeting, interconnected, and alive.

References

[1] Aton, J. M. (1981). *Sons and Daughters of Thoreau: The Spiritual Quest in Three Contemporary Nature Writers* [Doctoral dissertation, Ohio University].

[2] Dowie, W. (1991). *Peter Matthiessen*. Twayne Publishers.

[3] Jenkins, M. (Ed.). (2000). *The Peter Matthiessen Reader: Nonfiction, 1959-1961*. Random House.

[4] Johnston, K. P. (2015). Zen at Auschwitz. *Commonweal, 142*(5), 28–30.

[5] Kaza, S., & Kraft, K. (Eds.). (2000). *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*. Shambhala.

[6] Lyon, T. J. (1979). [Review of *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Matthiessen]. *Western American Literature, 14*(1), 62–63.

[7] Matthiessen, P. (1972). *The Tree Where Man Was Born: The African Experience*. Viking Press.

[8] Matthiessen, P. (1978). *The Snow Leopard*. Viking Press.

[9] Matthiessen, P. (1985). *Nine-Headed Dragon River: Zen Journals, 1969-1982*. Random House.

[10] Matthiessen, P. (1987). *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. Vintage. (Original work published 1965)

[11] Nelson, D. (2005). Words to Live by. *Science & Spirit, 6*, 74–77.

[12] Oh, I. (2005). *Meditation on America: Peter Matthiessen's Exploration of the Myth of Progress in the Watson Trilogy* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Tulsa].

[13] Tredinnick, M. (2005). *The Land's Wild Music*. Trinity University Press.

[14] Puji. 1984. *Wudeng Huiyuan* [Compendium of the Five Lamps]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.

[15] Yamashiro, S. (2003). *Peter Matthiessen and the Literature of Environmental Justice: "All Problems Merge"* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Nevada, Reno].