

# Road to a Better Society:

## Buddhist or Daoist?

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Many schools of thought have attempted to address the question of true understanding. That is, understanding that transcends existence and captures the truth of reality. Buddhist thought as expressed in *The Heart Sutra* and Daoism as expressed by Zhuangzi are two prominent philosophies that are celebrated in this regard. People of many generations have tried to derive from them the true meaning of life, and thus live in ways that produce a better society.

In *The Heart of Understanding*, a commentary on *The Heart Sutra*, the author Thich Nhat Hanh coins the term “inter-being” and uses it to provide a lucid and logical explanation of “emptiness,” making its relevance to our lives very easy to understand. The inevitable connection between all things, such as that described in the example of how the logger, the cloud and the sun is in this sheet of paper, unites together all of existence in a way that transcends our ordinary concept of the world. Looking from the Buddhist perspective, one can see everything in anything; everything exists because everything else exists. Everything depends on the existence of everything else. That is the idea behind inter-being. To exist is to inter-be. Everything,

therefore, is “empty” of a separate self. Nothing exists independently. “One contains everything, and everything is just one.”<sup>1</sup>

Applying such a philosophy to our lives can be transformational. To begin, the teaching itself claims that in truly understanding it, one will overcome all pain. As the idea of emptiness allows one to realize that all human concepts are in fact void of any true meaning, concepts such as pain and suffering become hollow and insignificant. One may even come to appreciate sadness as much as he or she appreciates happiness, due to the realization that the latter cannot be independent of the former. Following from this, there are in fact no opposites at all; all feelings and perceptions are unreal and exist only in our mind. Even existence and non-existence, birth and death, are only concepts constructed in our mind. The idea of continuation—that birth and death only signify the transition from one state to another, like the transition from water to cloud—eliminates human obsession with the idea of death. Fear of death becomes illogical, as the idea of death is in fact meaningless: we always existed and will always exist, in one form of existence or another. In understanding this, people can come to terms with their misfortunes much easier and accept the bad with the good. A more neutral and stable attitude can be established, thus preventing the person from focusing too much on their feelings and magnifying their pains. Tragedies are no longer so tragic; death and suffering is no longer worthy of fear. Surely, a society based on the teachings of *The Heart Sutra* will have less unrest, less depressed citizens, less suicidal incidents, and more harmony. In all circumstances, its people will be freed from anxiety, pain, and fear.

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1 Thich Nhat Hanh 16.

Daoism, on the other hand, takes a different approach to understanding truth. Where *The Heart Sutra* mainly focuses on describing reality through its philosophy, Daoism focuses more on using fables to describe how we should live our lives. Instead of putting into clear explanations the truth of existence, Daoism prescribes how one should behave in accord with nature and the world. In this sense, *The Heart Sutra* leaves us to interpret what good life is after understanding the truth, while Daoism prescribes how we ought to act. Interestingly, this revolves around one word: inactivity. How we should act is not to act.

According to the idea of inactivity, one should not do anything in the intention to change what is already there. It is unnecessary to plan or to worry about what to do, for through our inactivity, nature will deal with everything. Our intentional actions to alter the reality of any one moment is a form of destruction, as through it the thing we change will become different and is in that sense destroyed. Our actions, according to Daoism, do more harm than good. To conform to nature and to live spontaneously—to eat when hungry and to sleep when tired, without planning anything beforehand—will prevent unnecessary troubles to nature and to humanity. One should only do what is necessary to sustain his life. Any additional labor is excess, as when we die “our physical form decays and with it the mind likewise,”<sup>2</sup> regardless of how hard we have worked in life. Through such a philosophy one should be able to free himself of all desires and concerns. He would see himself as one with nature; “selfless” in the literal sense that he is without a separate self. Such a person would therefore become completely detached from society and from all human actions.

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2 In Chinese: “其形化，其心與之然。”

While Daoism has its similarities with Buddhism with regard to selflessness and being one with everything, due to the extreme nature of Daoist thought, it is much harder to apply its philosophy to the contemporary world than it is to apply the philosophy of *The Heart Sutra*. Many would say, and quite reasonably so, that one would have to be a madman to give up his citizenship, his job and his belongings, to become a hermit in the wilderness. Such a philosophy can also be seen as contradictory to the quest for a better society, as inactivity denotes a lack of interaction, negotiation, cooperation and exchange among people, which is the basis of every society. If everyone were to live in solitude and away from society, there can be no such thing as a “society.” It is not possible to speak of a better society while considering Daoist philosophy seriously in its full unadulterated form. Moreover, the Daoist concept of “the use of uselessness,” which explains how it is best to be useless and of no value to others in order for self-preservation, does not support the idea of a society. To be of no use to others is to be unable to contribute to society, which although is in line with Daoist thought, is not at all favorable to the interests of societies and civilization. The application of knowledge and talent is what improves society, but ironically is considered burdensome from the Daoist perspective. Thus, it could be said that this philosophy conflicts with contemporary life in ways that make it highly inapplicable. Such a tradition would not only fail to produce a better society, but instead destroy it. That is not to say that it is necessarily bad, as the simple and detached life may indeed be the good life, but when considered in the context of societies, Daoism is not a philosophy that supports and promotes its activities.

On the other hand, *The Heart Sutra* does not dictate how one should or should not act in life, nor does it condemn human activity and label it as the destroyer of nature. Instead, it provides a simple philosophy that offers people a new perspective on the world and on their existence. In understanding the truth of inter-being and how everything exists because they have to, one can develop a new appreciation for everything regardless of its perceived value—for “If it exists, then one speck of dust exists. If it doesn’t exist, then the whole cosmos doesn’t.”<sup>3</sup> Nothing should be taken for granted, not even garbage. This also develops a much needed understanding and humbleness within people, where the rich do not look down on the poor as they are by no means better. “This is like this because that is like that,”<sup>4</sup> therefore there can be no judgment of others; the prostitute is not in any degree less morally correct than the lawyer is—in fact, without the prostitute the lawyer would not be able to live the way he is currently living. Any one person’s situation becomes the responsibility of everyone else. Through this perspective, those who are less fortunate than others will be able to see their role in humanity and feel better about themselves, while the more fortunate people may become more compassionate and charitable.

By this token, Buddhist thought is much more likely to produce a better society than Daoism, as the former promotes a healthy attitude among people while the latter promotes detachment from society. The two philosophies are in this respect radically different; one does not so much as comment on whether or not the establishment of societies are in the best interest of mankind, while

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3 Thich Nhat Hanh 16.

4 *Ibid.* 33.

the other claims it is better to do without them, for all human activities are considered futile and unnatural. Clearly, in the context of producing a better society, Buddhist philosophy is by far more suitable than Daoism.

## References

- Chuang Tzu. *Wandering on the Way: Early Daoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. Tr. Victor H. Mair. Honolulu: U of Hawaii P, 1998.
- Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra*. Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax P, 1988.