

The Nature of Reality in The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti and Zhuangzi

The nature of reality is explained in most religions and provides the reader with a perspective on their life. Both Buddhist and Daoist scriptures teach the nature of reality through stories. In the Buddhist text of The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti, translator Robert Thurman uses dialogue to express the nature of reality. In Zhuangzi, the author Zhuang Zhou briefly describes a dream he had which reflects his assumptions on true reality. Both these stories contain similar perceptions of how one should view life; understanding that everything is made the same and is equal, as well as not believing that we know everything. However, Zhuangzi is much more individual, whereas Mahayana Buddhism stresses community enlightenment.

The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti is a Mahayana Buddhist text which tackles important fundamentals of the original Buddhist teaching such as corruption, impurity, and true enlightenment. The dialogue between the Goddess and Bodhisattva Sariputra contains insight into what it means to be completely enlightened. In this Dialogue, the Goddess proved that Sariputra was impure. When Sariputra questioned the Goddess, she explained that he was attached to the idea of women being inferior to men. In this Dialogue, the Goddess states, “the holy liberation is equality of all things!” (59) This signifies that Buddhism strives for enlightenment for all beings, regardless of gender, class, or race. This story holds great significance with its modern view of equality.

In Zhuangzi, most of the text explains what one must do to live in a world full of corruption and immortality. The author, Zhuang Zhou, includes a story about a dream that he had. In this dream, he was a Butterfly, and he was in complete peace. He had no worries or desires, instead, he was only fixated on going from flower to flower. When he awoke, Zhuang

Zhou could not distinguish if the reality he was living in was the true reality. The way he felt when he was a Butterfly was completely different from how he felt as a human. The only difference between himself and a Butterfly was his motives or desires.

Both of these reflect the nature of reality. One aspect they both signify is how we are not superior to other beings. In the *Zhuangzi*, this is shown through the analogy of the Butterfly. Since we regard our own desires and motives higher than other living things, it suggests that we see ourselves as more valuable than other living creatures. This stigma goes against Daoist teachings. Instead of just thinking about personal desires or issues, we must take a step back and understand that we are not the center of everything. For example, a Butterfly does not think about what we are thinking. If we think something is beautiful or ugly, a Butterfly is not going to think the same way. The Butterfly has its own thoughts and motives and is not concerned about ours. Our own concerns are completely relative to us, and Daoism suggests that we should disregard these concerns and be more understanding of all living things. This is also shown in *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti* in which the Goddess emphasizes that all living things can become enlightened. Many Bodhisattvas had the idea that men were more virtuous than women by the rule of nature, yet this is untrue. The Goddess stated, “All living things are just the same; they do not transmigrate nor are they born!” (62) The idea that women cannot attain enlightenment contradicts the teachings of Buddha. Therefore, when certain Bodhisattvas disregard the equality for females, it makes them improper. At the end of the Dialogue, the Goddess switches her body with Sariputra, signifying the fact that all things are the same. That woman is just in the form of a woman, just as Sariputra is in the form of a woman. It does not impair their virtue or value. The idea that all living things in nature are equal and therefore you cannot regard one higher than another is present in both teachings.

Another aspect that both scriptures highlight about the reality of nature is that we do not know everything. In both texts, the Goddess and Zhuangzi state that there is still so much unknown, and we cannot assume we know everything. When Sariputra asks how he can attain enlightenment now, the Goddess responds with, “no one attains perfect enlightenment with Buddhahood.” (62) This quote highlights the Goddesses understanding that there is a constant striving towards enlightenment. If one were to believe that they have achieved perfect enlightenment, they are impure. One must continue to try and uncover the unknown and be at peace with not knowing. Enlightenment is continued learning. This idea of not knowing everything is also shown in Zhuangzi, where Zhuang Zhou heavily questions his reality. It is interesting that a man so wise still is unsure about his existence. He cannot distinguish if he is a Butterfly or a Human. This way of questioning and emphasizing the unknown and the nature of reality is shown directly in both texts.

Even though both promote the idea that all living things are equal, they do this differently. In Daoism, the teachings signify that you cannot regard yourself as higher than another living thing. The way of enlightenment is more personal rather than as a community. Buddhism explains that the way to complete enlightenment is when all living things are enlightened. Therefore, you are striving to enlighten all beings instead of just yourself. For example, the Goddess states, “I belong to the great vehicle, as all need that teaching to attain enlightenment.” (60) The mention of the great vehicle relates to the goal of Buddhism, for all to become enlightened. The Goddess claims that she cannot be enlightened until all are enlightened, questioning the virtue of the Bodhisattva Sariputra in which he does not see women becoming enlightened. In contrast to this, the way of Daoism is a much more personal journey. A lot of Daoist teaching promotes individualism. The Zhuangzi states, “a mystical philosophy for the

spiritual nourishment of the individual.” (4)¹ The Daoist journey is to present spiritual freedom through the reform of the individual. These Daoist texts have little to no regard for society and are solely focused on personal growth.

Although the Zhuangzi highlights how we should not regard ourselves as higher than other living beings, The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti seems to have put these teachings in a more applicable way. The teachings included in this text show a very progressive standpoint, with an emphasis on feminism and equality for all genders. Expressing equality for women was rare at the time that this was created in which very traditional roles were indoctrinated into society. In contrast, the Zhuangzi does not have any reference to equality between diverse groups within humanity. Therefore, since The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti contains more progressive and relevant teachings on how to get rid of discriminatory and constructive thoughts, it presents a superior understanding to the Zhuangzi.

These texts provide readers with their idea of the nature of reality. The idea that everything is the same and that humans do not know everything is shown in both the Zhuangzi and The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti. They claim that we should not regard ourselves as higher than other beings because we are all equal. Some differences between the texts include how the Zhuangzi provides a much more individual approach to this, whereas in Buddhism the focus is more on the community. The Buddhist idea of the nature of reality is much more progressive and relevant so therefore it provides a more advanced understanding.

¹ Watson, Burton. “The Complete Works of Zhuangzi.” Accessed November 10, 2022. <https://terebess.hu/english/tao/Zhuangzi-Burton-Watson.pdf>.

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