

# A Critical Analyse of Vimalakirti's Teachings

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**Abstract:** *Often called the VimalakirtiNirdesa Sutra, possibly written almost two thousand years ago, yet it maintains its freshness and irony as well as its wisdom. Modern readers particularly appreciate its lesson on women's equality and the education of laypeople.*

## 1. Introduction

Vimalakirti's Teaching explains Mahayana Buddhism's basic teachings in fourteen relatively short chapters. Vimalakirti's Mahayana Sutra / Teaching Jewel discusses very sophisticated Arhats and Bodhisattvas, a supposedly ill, advanced lay bodhisattva. Particularly prominent in East Asian Buddhism, teaching clarifies the sense of non-duality. It emphasizes the importance of the Bodhisattva concept of "saving all beings," as well as many other critical themes in Mahayana Buddhism. Teaching does this in a thoughtful and spiritually creative if complicated, manner that includes irony, satire, dramatic drama, magic, poetry, and luxurious explanation, as well as a simple doctrinal debate. The style of presentation makes The Teaching of Vimalakirti one of the most exciting, inspiring, and readable, if weird, Mahayana Sutra, in reality, a Sutra that is so exceptional that readers are urged to relax their rational, discursive, habitual way of thinking to absorb the teaching fully. Most importantly, the Sutra emphasizes the non-dual education that all dichotomies such as nirvana and samsara, sickness and health, sacred and secular, and men and women are ultimately empty, and thus make no sense.<sup>3</sup> When this teaching is fully realized, one fully understands (as Dogen and Suzuki Roshi continually point out) that everything is already complete-so' try your best and show up.

## 2. Origin and Brief History

The Sutra was most likely written for the first time in India between the 1st century B.C. and the 1st century B.C. (with about 100 CE most frequently mentioned), making it one of the early Mahayana Sutra to be written down. It was probably (but not certainly) handed down orally from the time of the Buddha. In 180 CE, the Sutra was first translated into Chinese. At least six additional Chinese translations remain in existence, attesting to the prominence of the Sutra in East Asian Buddhism, where it has become a well-known genre of literature, not just a religious text. The translation of Kumarajiva, divided into 14 parts, remains the most famous of these translations. Subsequently, the Sutra was translated into Japanese (about the turn of the 6th century), Tibetan (from the original Sanskrit) and many Central Asian languages. Recent translations into English (at least six) and other modern languages are now available. Except for fragments, the original text of Sanskrit did not survive. Since there has never been a school built around the Sutra and never been used as an object of devotion, some other Sutra like the Heart sutra and the Lotus Sutra have never enjoyed their popularity. It has never experienced the reputation of India and Tibet in East Asia.

## The Storyline

The Buddha is conscious that Vimalakirti, a vibrant local Bodhisattva, is ill and urges his most prominent disciples to visit him when he is teaching Dharma to hundreds of thousands of people and non-people on the outskirts of north-eastern Indian Vaisali. They all refuse to go because he has punished every one of them because they don't understand the Dharma. Finally, in his sickroom, Manjusri, the mythical Bodhisattva of Wisdom, goes on to discuss doctrine issues with Vimalakirti, magically expanding to accommodate the vast assembly (all 35,000 of them). So Manjusri tells Vimalakirti why he's sick. He is told he is suffering because of love because every living being is (spiritually) ill. Vimalakirti then asks the Bodhisattvas in attendance to say to the assembly what they define as non-duality. In the end, Manjusri says that while they have all spoken well, their explanations are dualistic, because non-duality cannot be expressed in words at all (though his answer remains tainted, too). Vimalakirti is then questioned for his clarification of non-duality, and he remains completely silent. This is Vimalakirti's great thunderous silence and the high point of the Sutra. In the last four chapters, the scene has moved back to Vaisali, where the Buddha is teaching. The park is wider to accommodate Manjusri and Vimalakirti and their large group magically transported back to Buddha. Amid other Buddha teachings, both Indra, the Gods ' King, and Maitreya, the future Buddha, promise to protect and spread the Sutra and all rejoice in the Vimalakirti lesson.

## Seven Themes

In the teachings of Vimalakirti, there are many subjects related to Mahayana Buddhism directly or indirectly. Here are seven listed.

## The Dehistoricization of Buddhism.

The Buddha and his disciples lived in space and time-bound historical context as recorded in the Canon of Pali. They marched through cities and towns, mostly unknown to passers-by. On the other hand, events in Mahayana Sutra take place in both historical and mythical realities, as in this Sutra. While Vimalakirti is portrayed as an older man living an authentic existence, Manjusri and the other Bodhisattvas are still young mythological figures, not limited to time and space. In comparison to modern and historical monks and ordinary people, Bodhisattva is not true and lives in archetypal reality. The Buddha and the Dharma are also set in an archetypal context. The Buddha is now a divine entity (his pure dharmakaya form) who appears on earth in bodily form (his nirmanakaya form) to instruct, while the Dharma has become a purely spiritual reality whose essence is

undefinable and must be felt or implemented, rather than scientifically understood.

In consequence, Buddhism has been universalized, idealized and historied. By doing so, the teachings became 'a living, eternal, divine truth' accessible to all beings across space and time. In contrast to historical truths, the archetypal forces and forms of myth are experienced through felt understandings and indefinable meanings-and in this way they touch us much more deeply than the worldly historical truth can. Still, as human beings, we need both of them, because we live in both realities. As a result, the VimalakirtiNirdesa weaves back and forth between these two realms-as when the Buddha suddenly performs a miracle during a dharma talk in a historical setting in a garden in a nearby town!

### **Magic in Mahayana Sutras.**

According to the Buddhist tradition, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, as spiritually advanced beings, possess a vast array of magical powers. The showing of these forces throughout the teachings gives the Sutra a distinctive, illusory quality. For example, before the Sutra starts, Vimalakirti, the ever-young Bodhisattva, uses his magical powers to turn himself into an elderly layperson. In Chapter 1, the Buddha sets 500 parasols carried by 500 visiting young people into a single colossal canopy covering the entire billion-dollar universe of the planet. In chapters 5 and 6, Vimalakirti expands its 10-foot room to accommodate Manjusri and his large assembly, as well as thirty-two hundred thousand visitors and their high thrones from the distant Buddha Land, all without crowding. In Chapter 7, the goddess living in the house showers the whole assembly of the celestial flowers-and later the sex with Sariputra. And in Chapter 10, Vimalakirti creates a magically formed Bodhisattva and sends it back to the distant Buddha Land to bring back a vessel containing fragrant ambrosia that feeds the entire assembly. In short, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are capable of transforming themselves into different likenesses, of moving themselves through space and time, and of turning anything into anything else.

What is the meaning of the magic of Mahayana Sutras? What kind of work does it have? One part of the answer is the essence of the inconceivable spiritual truth('Inconceivable Emancipation') which lies as an aim in Mahayana Buddhism. If it is inexpressible in terms, how can Bodhisattvas teach the Dharma like Vimalakirti? The reason is that it is shown by practice, in this case, by magic. The second part of the answer is the view of Mahayana that life itself is a magic show-that what we think we see is an apparition like that formed by magicians. It's not that, in some way, what we think we see isn't there. The question is how we perceive our experience. This is why the magical acts of the Sutra are to be understood as demonstrations, if fanciful presentations, of the Dharma, of what existence is like. Again, in short, the beauty of Mahayana Sutras is meant to be poetic and romantic for the same reasons that the historical truth of the Pali Canon has been universalized, idealized and historied in the Mahayana tradition.

### **Buddha Lands**

In the presence of many Buddha Countries (Buddha Fields,

Pure Lands), the fantasmagorical depiction of the Mahayana Sutra is evident. In Buddhist cosmology, infinite space is occupied with world systems, a thousand of which make up a small universe. One thousand of them are in the center of the world and a thousand form a vast universe following the Buddha Land, which is led by one specific Buddha who is in charge of the spiritual development of all beings in this realm. Bodhisattvas from Buddha Lands through the development of their minds in the form of spiritual practice. There are pure Buddha lands with relatively simple and unclean spiritual development, which is an example of our Saha universe of misery. Among the Buddha Lands mentioned in the Sutra are Sarvagandhasugandha, chaired by Buddha Sugandhakuta,<sup>13</sup> and Abhirati, the Buddha Land of Buddha Aksobhya, from which Vimalakirti himself originates. To purify all of us in the world system, he was willingly reincarnated as an older man in our Saha universe of misery.

What does the (presumably) reality of the fictional Buddha Lands have to do with our spiritual development in Mahayana sutras? The short answer is that if the Buddha Land (like the dharmakaya form of the Buddha) is meant to represent a pure mind, and we have the ability, through spiritual practice, to create a world in which we live (think poetic imagery here), then we also have the ability to develop a pure mind by following the Bodhisattva ideal.

### **Vimalakirti's Use of Skillful Means.**

Because a single solution to "saving all things" is unsuccessful, people and their forms of suffering are very different. To be effective; then, a Bodhisattva must approach people skillfully in different ways. Mahayana Buddhism places great emphasis on skillful means (Upayakaushalya). Vimalakirti, like any other Bodhisattva, displays this quality in Buddhist literature. Although a still young Bodhisattva, he looks like an older, sick (but costly) layman who wears a lay person's white clothes and lives in the city of Vaisali like other ordinary people. All this he does to spread the Dharma. He meets everybody in his world, in schools, businesses and even brothels, to put non-dual life into practice (see below). He looks like a responsible family man with a job and a home-an ordinary, if influential layman, in other words. Because he is "sick," people come to visit him to teach him the Dharma. The Sutra, therefore, points out that the dichotomy between monastics and the Laity is false (and this seems to be why Vimalakirti is portrayed as a layman) as is the dichotomy of men and women as a goddess living in Vimalakirti's house which Shariputra humorously teaches in the chapter of the goddess.

### **The Admonishment of Buddha's Disciples.**

The practise of skilful means does not always take the form of "tough love," as demonstrated by Vimalakirti's warning of many disciples of the Buddha, in chapters 3 and 4, about the failure of their understanding of the Dharma. As the Sutra's teachings are for highly advanced Bodhisattvas and Arhats (those who are ready to leave the 'Work') it may seem that the misconceptions we make are less far off on the way.] A significant concern for Vimalakirti is the attempt to make people release their different attachments by use of skilled means-and that is all he does throughout the Sutra. When

people differ in their relationships, the interaction with each one of the Bodhisattvas is somewhat different. Nevertheless, most of the four attachments illustrated in the Pali Canon seem to include one or more of them. These are: attachment to views (Shariputra has attached himself to the opinions of "proper" meditation when meditating at the foot of the tree; Purna has attached himself to a look on how to "properly" teach the Dharma, "ignoring whether his students can learn and understand the Dharma from a given perspective), attachment to ethics and outside practices for their own sake alone. The fourth attachment illustrated in the Pali Canon is an attachment to sensual pleasure (in the second chapter, Vimalakirti urges the Vaisalis to abandon their devotion to their physical bodies, which are both the source of sensual pleasure as well as suffering). When examining Vimalakirti's warning of each Bodhisattva, attempt to identify which of the above attachments are involved. During the study, bear in mind that Vimalakirti does not seek to humiliate the disciples of Buddha, but to help them proceed along the path of their spiritual development.

### Vimalakirti's Thunderous Silence.

The Sutra reaches its peak through the wordless guidance of silence by Vimalakirti. In nine Chapter, Manjusri asks the Bodhisattvas what is non-dual teaching (or, more formally, "How do Bodhisattvas enter the Nonduality Dharma Door?"). Each gives an answer that seems more insightful than the last one. Manjusri, the previous to reply, says that they have all spoken well. Still, their solutions, expressed in concepts, are essentially dualistic—as is his answer because it is shown in ideas. Of course we should distinguish the reasons why his silence is "thunderous," as it is shown in Shariputra's confrontation with the princess, between various types of silence, for amused silence and anger, the silence of stupor, etc. Instead, his silence is the silence of enlightenment, which is the absence of a concept of silence and, for that matter, of any other idea. When appropriate, he uses speech and silence, acting spontaneously according to circumstances. The silence of Vimalakirti is "thunderous" because it opens the gate of non-duality.

### Vimalakirti's Gate of Nonduality.

As humans, we are beings of duality, because we use dualist ideas like good/evil, compassion/meanness and great/small to think about and express our perceptions and thoughts—and to learn and understand Dharmen. We can use the two Dharma gates of duality to differentiate between dualization and nonduality. We use dualistic definitions because they are represented in pairs of contradictions. Once again, we human beings have no choice but to apply principles in our everyday lives—and, through the door of a dualistic mindset, to approach and understand complete non-dual truth ('emptiness'). But that does not mean that we leave behind the realm of duality, because the duality of duality/nonduality itself is transcended, through recognizing space, because no one can consider it to be "true" itself. If this were, it would not be possible to illuminate ("wake up to who we are").

How does a Bodhisattva reach through the dualistic into the world of non-duality? This is the question asked by Vimalakirti in Chapter 9-and 32 by the assembly of Bodhisattvas—which demonstrates how duality can be transcended utilizing its inherent contradictions. Here are

three examples: (Sriganta) "There will be no possession, I and mine will be two, and the absence of presumption will not exist;" (Vidyudeva) "knowledge and ignorance are dualist; the nature of innocence and experience is the same, for ignorance is undefined, incalculable, and beyond the realm of thought.

The lesson here (which is at the heart of the Sutra) is that the mind produces pairs of opposites—and one enters into the Dharma Gate of Non-duality when one understands this and sees that it is not the truth at all, but only means a purpose. In a thorough understanding of this, Vimalakirti shows his knowledge through his "thunderous silence" and, to the benefit of all beings, his interactions with the people around him. In essence, this means that a truly awakened person lives a life without preference—though somewhat paradoxically, a truly awakened person can enjoy his preferences as long as they are let go.

### Practising with the Vimalakirti Sutra

While we can not live Vimalakirti's life, we can practice in many different ways with Vimalakirti Sutra. There are four here. First, it is possible to approach the silence of Vimalakirtias a koan. "What is silence?" "Show me Vimalakirti's silence (in a non-dual way)" In both the Secrets of the Blue Cliff and the Buch of Serenity, Vimalakirti's nonduality appears as a koan. We can also work towards freeing us from the things that prevent us from spiritual emancipation, which was an essential task in the teaching of Buddha. The bonds of terror, hate and paranoia (the classic three poisons) have complex and numerous types here. The third method is to consider "stickiness" in our own lives (both on and off the mat). For instance, did Zen Buddhism (for example, becoming a priest or becoming conscious of its doctrines) not become an end in itself but the nonduality of Vimalakirti?? Lastly, in keeping with our Dogen's Soto zen practice, we will experience the three poisons and the "stickiness" appearing and moving through our minds in an open consciousness (shikantaza). You can practice being a Bodhisattva, but you can do so in a way that is not-Bodhisatta. You can do it again, but you can do it in a non-bodhisattva way. You can do that, return to where you are at present (which is the whole time).

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