Vimalakirti, 1
Joan Sutherland
Cerro Gordo Temple ~ Santa Fe, NM
April 7, 2011

Good evening, bodhisattvas.

From time to time I get an invitation to teach somewhere else on a topic of someone else's choosing, and, the topic that comes with the invitation is framed or asked in a different way than we usually speak about things. That's great because then I have to think, *Well, what do I think about that? From our perspective, what would we say about whatever the topic is?*

Such an event is occurring this summer. The topic proposed is "Transforming Negative Patterns." And, I was asked to also a very short piece about that, and somewhere in all of the literature around the event was the statement that Buddhist meditation was about transforming negative patterns, meaning of thought and feeling, in us. And I thought, *huh.* Do I think that's what buddhist meditation is about? I'm not so sure! So, I wanted to do two things tonight. First is to read what I promise you is a short piece that sort of began with that question of is that what buddhist meditation is about, and also then offer some advice from our perspective about what we might do with quote negative unquote thoughts and feelings, other than transform them.

And then the second thing I want to do is begin probably a series about something from the tradition on this question. I always like to go back and dig in and find something grounded in the Ancients on a subject, so the second part will be about that. But I will begin with the first, with this short piece which begins with what I think buddhist meditation might be for, and it's called "Leaning into Life."[1]

> Sometimes it can seem as though being human is a problem that spiritual practice is meant to solve. But buddhist meditative and related practices actually have a different focus : developing our human faculties to see more clearly the true nature of things, so that we can participate in and respond to how things are in a more

[1] Published in the Lion's Roar as "Gaining Perspective on Habitual Patterns," https://www.lionsroar.com/gaining-perspective/

generous and helpful way. Our individual awakenings become part of the world's awakening. This means leaning into life, and to do that we have to recognize what gets in the way. For each of us, this is likely to include certain habitual patterns of thinking and feeling in reaction to what we encounter.

Meditation and inquiry are methods (only methods), ways to have direct experiences of the deepest insights of our tradition — of the interpermeation of all things and the way things, including our habitual reactions, rise into existence for awhile and then fall away again. Everything is provisional, and everything influences everything else. The implication for our inner lives is that they are seamless with the outer world, and constantly changing with it. We're not encapsulated consciousnesses bouncing around in a world of other consciousnesses and inert matter, but part of a vibrant, ever-changing field that encompasses everything we can experience, and more. Everything is rising and falling in this field, sometimes for a nanosecond and sometimes for a geological age, but still appearing and disappearing in an infinitely complex web of other things doing the same. To the extent that we experience, in the ordinary moments of our lives, the seamlessness of our inner states and outer circumstances, we're being more realistic, more in tune with the way things actually are.

From this perspective, how do we deal with the habitual patterns of heart and mind that inhibit us from having a more realistic understanding of life, and a more intimate engagement with it? Perhaps it becomes less important to tackle the thoughts and feelings directly, to do something about them, than it is to see them in their true proportion. A reaction, after all, is just one thing among many appearing in the field at that particular moment, no more or less important than anything else.

Simply put, how we react is not the most important element of any situation. When we fixate on our reactions, they pull us away from a primary experience of what's actually happening, into a small room where how we think and feel about the experience becomes the most important thing, the thing we're now in relationship with. If you and I are having a conversation and I become angry, I might find my emotions so compelling that suddenly I'm not in a conversation with you anymore, but with my anger. *What's wrong with this person? This must not stand!* Then, particularly if I'm involved in a spiritual practice, I'm likely to have reactions to my reactions. *After all this meditation, I shouldn't be getting angry like this!* Or, *This is righteous anger!* Now I'm in the third order of experience, moving further and further away from the actual conversation with you.

If we pull the camera back for a wider view, it's immediately apparent that a reaction like this is only one of many things rising in any given moment in the field. There's you and me and our surroundings, your mood, my capacity for misunderstanding, the

temperature of the air, the sound of birds or traffic outside the window and the neighborhood beyond that, the most recent calamity in the news, and more other phenomena than we can possibly take into account. The moment is vast, with a lot of space between the things in it. The moment is generous. I don't have to zero in on my reaction, to act impulsively on it or repudiate it or improve it, all of which tend to reinforce the sense of its importance, but just accept it as one (small) part of what's happening. Usually that simple shift changes everything. It allows us to step out of the small room of second-order experience and back into a fuller, more realistic experience of the moment.

If reaction is a move into the partial, a privileging of how we think and feel above everything else, response emerges from the whole of oneself, grounded in the whole situation, with each element assuming its true size and shape. In responding we're not doing something about a situation, but participating in it.

It's interesting that our evaluation of a habitual reaction as negative doesn't arise until the third order of experience, fully two circles away from what's actually happening : it's our reaction to our reaction to what's happening. The ancients called this putting a head on top of your head. Not only are we distancing ourselves from the original situation, but even from our reaction to the situation. That kind of distancing can be a defense against a reaction that's causing unease out of proportion to its proportion, as it were, and that's when inquiry can be useful.

The basic inquiry is *What is this?* And it's a way back to what we're trying to avoid. We drop the self-centered focus of the third order of experience and re-enter the second, encountering our reaction directly, without preconceptions and even with interest. We've picked up one thing from the field and are taking a closer look for a while. We inquire into whatever *What is this?* evokes—thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, memories. The unexpected and surprising are particularly valuable, because they come from somewhere other than what we can usually imagine. Habits can be deeply ingrained, but over time it's possible that even a quite troublesome reaction can assume its proper size and shape as one thing among many, rising and falling with everything else, no longer especially inhibiting or especially fascinating. And we move closer to a life lived in response instead of reaction, closer to participation in the way things actually are.

Now to shift gears, dramatically. This is either going to be something for everybody or nothing for nobody, depending on how it all shakes out.

When I was thinking about what does the tradition say, what can the tradition tell us, one of the many things the tradition can tell us about…the thing that swam up to

my consciousness was a quote from Vimalakirti, which is "I am sick because the whole world is sick." He was this great bodhisattva and he said, "I'm sick" and "I'm sick because the whole world is sick." Now that seems like a very different relationship to negative patterns, right? So, I want to explore what might be there, how that might be a different way of looking at it, and it'll take some time but I want to begin with looking at the story of Vimalakirti as a myth, taking it as a myth and talking about some of the things that mythically lit up for me in re-reading the story.

This is from a sutra called *The Sutra that Vimalakirti Spoke*, and it's two thousand years old, and it was written in India. It's a Mahayana sutra and it was translated into Chinese in about the 5th century. The Chinese just immediately loved it and it became one of the foundational texts for Chan in China and later for Zen in Japan. Another title for it is *The Reconciliation of Dualities*, and that's the big theme, is when faced with an apparent duality, how do we reconcile it? Vimalakirti himself is sort of the embodiment of that in that he's always described as containing within himself lots of dualities. He was called a rich man who gave all his money to the poor, a man who lived among family and employees in a great household estate, but remained solitary. A man who went to the bars but didn't get drunk. So there was this sense of, when we talk about dualities and we talk about being presented with an apparent duality, we always talk about resolving it not by choosing one of the other — not by choosing A or B — but looking for C, looking for that new thing that can contain and embrace A and B and create something new. And so Vimalakirti himself is C. Vimalakirti himself is the reconciliation of the opposites, and, in that way, he seemed like a great person to speak to us — as a lay person who was profoundly devoted to his path and as someone who is considered a bodhisattva.

So, a lot of the commentaries talk about the immense improbability of Vimalakirti because of all of the contradictions that he embodied. So the story begins like this : it starts out in a garden in a town, a city in Northern India, and the Buddha is there. This takes place during the lifetime of Shakyamuni Buddha, and this is a beautiful park that has been given for his use by a famous courtesan of the city. And all of these beings of all different kinds gather here to hear him speak. So you have this sense of this vast assembly, not just of monks, nuns, laywomen, and laymen, but gods, bodhisattvas, and

even dragons and phoenixes, and all kinds of beings of all sorts who've gathered for this talk. As he usually did, the Buddha takes Q&A at the end, and Shariputra, who's one of his main disciples — many of you know that Shariputra is the person to whom *The Heart Sutra* is addressed : "Shariputra, form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form" — Shariputra steps forward and he says,

> I have a question. You are saying that this world, this existence of ours, that this is the Pure Land. But I don't experience it that way. I don't experience it as pure at all. I experience it as full of pain and suffering and horror and ugliness.

And the Buddha apparently gets down off of whatever seat he's sitting on and he digs his toes into the ground, and as soon as he digs his toes into the ground, suddenly Shariputra sees it as a Pure Land. So, here's the fundamental thing being set in place right at the beginning of this story. Shariputra says that the thing that I think feels very familiar to all of us — *This doesn't feel like a Pure Land to me. What do you mean in saying that?* — and the Buddha digs his toes in, comes down into the Earth, and Shariputra says, "Oh. Now I see it."

But what happens is the Buddha doesn't transform the world. He doesn't make the world pretty all of a sudden, and Shariputra says, "Oh, now it's a Pure Land because it's all pretty." That's not what happens at all. The Buddha says, "Shariputra, this was always the Pure Land. What's changed is your perception." That's a radical thing. That's the Buddha saying, *This world, as it is, this complicated, nuanced, gorgeous, difficult, confusing world* as it is *is already The Pure Land, and you don't think so because you couldn't see it. But now, your perception has changed, and you've seen what's already true.*

So here are the big questions underlying *The Sutra that Vimalakirti Spoke* : What does it mean that this world *as it is* is already The Pure Land? This world in all of its complications, and what is the shift in perception that Shariputra experiences that enables him to know that? I'm guessing both of those things are pretty close to our hearts, right? Oh, I like that saying 'many of our hearts.' It sounds like we all have lots of hearts in us! And many of them care about this question.

Then, the next thing that happens, more or less, is that the Buddha through either rumor or omniscience — take your pick of interpretation — knows that Vimalakirti is sick. He's in town and he's sick. So, he wants to send someone as his personal

representative to offer his condolences and his respects to Vimalakirti while he's sick. And he goes to all of his disciples and he asks them will they go for him. And every single one of them says, "Uh-uh. No way. I know Vimalakirti. I've had conversations with him and he freaks me out! Everything I think I know he pulls out from under me and I have no desire to go see him, so, no. Not me." And this happens over and over and over again.

And the Buddha goes to all the bodhisattvas and says, "Will you please go to Vimalakirti and send him my respects in his illness?" And all the bodhisattvas say, "Uh uh. Not me. He freaks me out. He is too weird! I'm not going. I don't want to tangle with him. I don't want to be alone in a room with him. Forget it!" So, finally, after going through dozens and hundreds and thousands of people, Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, says, "Okay. I'll go. Alright." And then everybody else who's said no thinks *Oooh. This is going to be good. The Bodhisattva of Wisdom up against Vimalakirti! I want to see this!* So, Manjushri takes off toward Vimalakirti's place, trailed by tens of thousands of people who want to see this conversation happen (although they don't want to *have* this conversation).

Meanwhile, back in his house, Vimalakirti, rumor or omniscience — depending on your viewpoint — knows that they're coming. And so he empties his entire house. He has every stick of furniture, every piece of art, everything taken, removed from the house, and he asks everybody who makes up part of the household to please leave for the day. And the only thing that's left is the couch he's lying on. So when Manjushri and this great retinue get to Vimalakirti's house, they walk in and the only thing they see is the sick bodhisattva lying on a couch. So, there is the stark fact, with no distraction, nothing to take your mind off of it, nothing to catch your interest, just : here is the greatest apparent duality of all. A sick bodhisattva? That's not supposed to happen. Right? What is that about? And there is nothing to stand in the way of their confrontation with the fact of this sick bodhisattva lying on a couch.

So, we'll come back to that theme of illness and what it means, but first Shariputra has to ask another question. And this exchange I love. So, he looks around, and he says, "But Sir, the room is completely empty. There are no chairs for any of these people to sit on." And Vimalakirti asks him, "Sir, I ask you : Did you come for the

dharma or did you come for a seat?" And that's so great, because if we ask ourselves that question : Did we come for the dharma or do we come for a seat? What are those seats? You know? Did we come for happiness, wisdom, peace, greater compassion, ease of suffering, you know, what are the 'seats' we came for? And Vimalakirti goes through a whole list of things that you have to give up in order to seek the dharma. He said if you're looking for anything — and he just sort of takes everything away right down to the Four Noble Truths — if you're looking at the fact of suffering, if you're going to relinquish the causes of suffering, if you're going to cultivate the path of no-suffering, then what you're seeking is suffering, its causes, its relinquishment, and the Path. You're not seeking the dharma. You've put something else in place of it. You have to be willing to give up your body and your life, let alone a seat, for the dharma.

Okay, so here's an interesting question. If the dharma isn't any of the teachings of the dharma, if you have to let all of that go — because any conception, any teaching you put as your goal becomes what you're seeking rather than the dharma — if it's not any of that, what is it? So the first thing that has to happen is you have to strip away all the things you think it is. You have to strip away all the things you want it to be. You have to strip away all the things you've been led to expect — by bad teachers, like me! — what it might be. You have to let go of all of that and stand on the bare ground. And wait. And then what comes to you when you are really on the bare ground, when you have really given away any sort of, one foot out the door or Plan B or kind of I sort of want to hold onto this idea of what I think it is…when you have given all of that away, what walks toward you? That's the dharma. That mystery, that thing that cannot be expressed, explained, anticipated, or anything else — that's what walks toward you on the bare ground and that's the dharma and that's what you have to be willing to seek. And nothing short of that.

So, I'm out of time and I can't go any further, but we'll come back next time to talk about how Manjushri begins to question him about 'How can you be ill?' and then Vimalakirti says his famous line,"I am sick because the whole world is sick," and then they talk about what that means, and then they talk about compassion as being the bodhisattva's response to that. That's to be continued.

I'll stop there tonight just to leave a little time for any comments or questions that you might have.

Q1 : How do you do this in the middle of the world at the same time?

JIS : Well that's what the *Vimalakirti Sutra* is about, right? What's the difficulty that you see?

Q1 : The immediate difficulty is having to give up things, and not that I don't want to give up things, not knowing how to. I have to go grocery shopping, right? Maybe the answer is: I go grocery shopping.

JIS : Yeah.

Q1 : And wait for the celery to hit me over the head.

JIS : Or you just go grocery shopping.

Q1 : Alright. So nothing has to be given up.

JIS : Not like that. Not at that level.

Q1 : It's something deeper that has to be given up.

JIS : Maybe the idea that going grocery shopping is an onerous task and I'd rather be having a bubble bath?

Q1 : No, no, I just…

JIS : I'm just saying that might be the kind of thing that you have to give up.

Q1 : I'm not thinking that any of this is an onerous task, I just…it's…let's bring it down to the basic level. I have to take a breath. And that's not an onerous task, it's just a fact.

JIS : Mmm hmm. So, you take a breath.

Q1 : You take a breath.

JIS : Yeah.

Q1 : Okay.

JIS : But if you have habitual negative reactions, that's what you have to give up. Okay? Or, give up the idea that taking the breath is going to 'get you something' on the road to awakening. It's just a breath. And it's full and complete as that. And doesn't need to be or do anything else. It's perfect as it is. Yeah?

Q1 : Yeah. Okay. Thank you.

Q2 : Once I was studying with a teacher, but the fact that I was brought up in the Catholic School came up, and I said that in that tradition they say you have to become like, you must become like children to…And I brought that up, and the way he answered it was, his point of view was that we are born in, what do you call, an 'unimpeded flow,' and that once we face our family and our society and our schooling and our peers and everything else, we can condition ourselves to survive in that environment. And we hide the unimpeded flow. And he thought that sitting was deconditioning and what he called 'untying the knot' to get to a place of the *tathagata*, which is being in every moment totally present and that by doing that, then there's no barrier. And he said but the thing that stops it is that we love dying of comfort, and if we're unwilling to give that up, we won't do it.

JIS : It's crazy, though, isn't it, because often the comfort is the flip side of the thing that's causing us to suffer so much. Yeah. I think so, and maybe the only thing I would add is in that sense of tathagata, it is that presence in the moment, but it's also seeing everything else as it is. It's *wow* when something appears to you as tathagata it's so itself, so entirely itself. Yeah.

Q3 : What really is seeking?

JIS : Yeah.

Q3 : That's all I can say. That's a big question, I think, in the way that…there's a different definition.

JIS : Yeah. Good. Let's keep coming back to that as we go through it. Anything else?

Q4 : This is actually the first time that I've heard the dharma as being anything that's left once you've removed all ideas about dharma. I love that. It's so immediate and fresh, and I'm curious where that sits and how I ever fit it before because it seems really important. Really important. So just embrace it all! It's that like a big part of this tradition?

JIS : [Laughing] Yeah. Yeah, it is. It's a huge part of the tradition because, you know, one of the things that Chan and Zen are is a kind of reaction to what they perceive as an over-focus on that stuff, and a kind of drowning in that kind of seeking,

that kind of pursuit. Yeah. And so, I think I mentioned this text became really foundational for Chan with this kind of radical idea.

Q4 : And this text is the *Vimalakirti Sutra*?

JIS : It is. It's Vimalakirti's response to Shariputra.

Q4 : Thank you.

JIS: Thank you.