

Vimalakirti, 2
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A beautiful spring evening to you all, bodhisattvas.

Last week we began talking about a text called *The Sutra As Spoken By Vimalakirti*, a text that was foundational to Chan Buddhism, to Chinese Buddhism, and out of which came the koan tradition. So, it's kind of an ancestor of ours, and I'd like to keep talking about it some more tonight and probably for a few more times as well.

The great theme of *The Sutra As Spoken By Vimalakirti* is nonduality, or as the Chinese say, with a kind of typical pungency, 'not two.' And, that's what it's about. It's about 'not two' in a lot of different ways. Vimalakirti lived a life of a householder but he was also deeply committed to his spiritual practice, and didn't see those two things as different, not unlike probably almost everybody in this room. And if this sutra is the kind of philosophical laying out of 'not two,' it then, over the next 1500 years, appeared in many different ways, embodied in many different ways in China. And because we here in this community are making community in a way that's different from most of what's happening in mainstream American Buddhism, we've looked for our ancestors, who are the people who have been asking the same kinds of questions we asked, and coming up with ways to embody 'not two,' that feels congruent, harmonious with our own senses of our lives.

And one of the ancestors that has come alive for some of us is a group of women about a thousand years after this sutra called the Daoren, and 'daoren' means people of the way, and they were women in sort of high classical Chinese culture who chose not to go into the monastic institutions of Buddhism, not to go into the convents, but not to live in the lives that were awaiting them otherwise in society. And so they came together in intentional communities and lived by spiritual rules or customs of spiritual discipline that they themselves developed and agreed to together. They were autonomous. But because of the way they lived, which was kind of quite beautiful and powerful, they were also trusted even though they lived outside the usual structures of

authority of the culture. And so they were able to go and be with women in all the different ways that women were in the culture. They could be with women in the fields farming. They could be in the very cloistered lives of women in upper class and literary families. And here we have a real embodiment of 'not two,' because in this tradition, which begins with *The Vimalakirti Sutra* — this is my interpretation — but my understanding is the practice of 'not two' is founded on two (two things), which is subverting and connecting. The subverting is at a philosophical level, which is what Vimalakirti is doing — subverting anything that reinforces or gives us a way to exercise our tendency to 'make two,' to make duality, to divide things up in to this pile and that pile, us and them, black and white, right and wrong, all the endless ways that we do that. So, subversion is important.

And then the second part is connecting. So, if we can subvert the habit of mind which makes twos and dualities, that's a really good thing because the world is not fundamentally dualistic. Dualism is, in this view of things, which is largely our view of things, dualism is a trick of the mind, not a description of the way the world inherently is. If we can subvert our tendency to make twos, then we can take the next step, which is to begin to connect those things that have been separated by the trick of the mind that is not two. So, clear the ground, clear out the bramble thicket of twos, divisions, categories, and separations, and then connect what has been artificially sundered — bring things back together. And that applies not only to our relationships with each other in all the ways we make us and them, you know — the apparently infinite ability of human beings to find different categories of us and them — but also say between us and the other creatures of the world, between us and the natural world as a whole, between red states and blue states — however it is that it appears, to connect those things. And to the extent that we are able to subvert and connect both philosophically, as Vimalakirti did, and in actual practice in our lives, in what we do in our lives as the Daoren did; to the extent that we can do that we are becoming more realistic. We are becoming closer and closer to the way things actually are, because the world as it actually is, when the trick of the mind is not in operation, is thunderously and radiantly not two.

This sutra, this *Vimalakirti Sutra*, was the seed that was planted that created this very rich tradition of which we are a late and fragile leaf on top of some tiny twig on the tree. I'll just say a couple of words for anybody who wasn't here last time. The legend of Vimalakirti is that he lived at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha, and the sutra actually begins with the Buddha giving a talk in a beautiful park in the city where Vimalakirti lives. And he hears that Vimalakirti is sick and he wants to send an emissary to go check on him, see how he is, and if there's anything he needs. But nobody, none of the bodhisattvas, none of the advanced disciples, nobody around the Buddha — and he asks hundreds of people — want to go talk with Vimalakirti because they've had encounters with him before in which they found him extremely disconcerting. So, you have this householder, this lay person, whom the bodhisattvas don't want to go be alone in a room with. And then you have the kind of added, sort of ramping up the stakes by the fact that Vimalakirti is sick. Well, he's a bodhisattva, so what is it about a sick bodhisattva, what is that about? That feels, in the terms of that time and place, like a contradiction. That's just too weird. Isn't the whole point about working your whole life to become a bodhisattva so that you don't have to be sick anymore? So what is that about, and, really, I'd rather spend Sunday in the park with the Buddha than go deal with this disconcerting, sick layperson. So, there's the kind of underlying duality that gets set up.

And then in that early part, as the sutra is introduced, there's an instance I won't repeat, but the upshot of it is, that the Buddha teaches that Shariputra says, "I have a really hard time seeing this world as a Pure Land. It's just too hard, it's too painful, there's too much bad stuff going on. How could this be a Pure Land?" And the Buddha says, "This place is already the Pure Land. It's your way of seeing it that makes you feel it's not." That's a really radical thing. That's saying there isn't this troubled, difficult painful world and our job is to fix it. *This world*, in all of its trouble and complication, this is the Pure Land. Okay, so then that question gets held all the way through the sutra, and we'll hold it all the way through these conversations. What could that mean that the world as-it-is is already the Pure Land, and it's our way of perceiving that makes that invisible to us.

Where we left it last time, as you'll recall, is finally Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, agrees : "Alright, I'll go talk to Vimalakirti." And then everybody else who's refused to go thinks *Oh, this is going to be good! Vimalakirti against Manjushri. There's a conversation, I don't want to have it but I want to watch it!* So, Manjushri ends up going to Vimalakirti's trailed by thousands and thousands of all of these beings who were in this park together.

And Vimalakirti knows they're coming so he clears out the house. He gets rid of everything in the house and he sends everybody away for the day, so that when they get there there's only Vimalakirti lying on a couch, lying on his sick bed. That's all there is. So you have this stark confrontation with the absolute fact, the sick bodhisattva; and nothing to distract you. Nothing else going on. You're just in a room alone with that. And Shariputra, who's kind of a slightly comic, wonderful figure throughout, in the midst of this sort of glory of this meeting and all of the potential, says, "Yeah, but where's everybody going to sit?" And so that's sort of where we left, because Vimalakirti asks him, "Good Sir, did you come for the dharma or did you come for a seat?"

And we talked a little bit last week about what are the seats we come looking for? When we come to practice, in what ways are we looking for a seat, which might be relief of suffering or greater compassion or wisdom or ease. I mean, there are lots of different ways that that can manifest. But to the extent that we are seeking *that*, that inhibits us from actually finding the dharma, because the dharma is none of those things. It's none of those goals, however noble they are. And it's none of the techniques or practices that have been taught over the last 2000 years, and by other people for many thousands of years before that. It's none of those techniques. The dharma is not a meditation. The dharma is not inquiry. The dharma is not even koans, it hurts me to say...The dharma is when we subvert all of our ideas about what it is, all of our ideas about what we think we're looking for, all of our ideas about how we think we're going to find it, the ways, the techniques we're going to use to find it. When we subvert all of that and we clear all of that away and we're standing on the bare ground, the dharma is what walks toward you then. Which, from anytime before you get to that moment, is

by its nature unimaginable to you. So, ideas are not really very helpful, actually; goals are not very helpful, only maybe distracting. Okay.

So, we don't have those seats. We let those seats go and we stand on the bare ground, and notice what happens. Nonetheless, Vimalakirti, being also a householder and sensitive to the needs of his guests, immediately contacts a buddha in another realm and orders about 32,000 large lion thrones for the comfort and use of his guests. So, in this ten by ten foot room — I'll just say parenthetically something I really love, since that time Vimalakirti's room, traditionally ten feet by ten feet, and since then the room that a zen teacher uses is traditionally in the temple ten feet by ten feet, in honor of Vimalakirti's room and what can happen there. So, work in the room, for all of you who are doing work in the room, takes place in Vimalakirti's ten by ten foot room, on 32,000 lion thrones.

Okay, so he brings in these lion thrones and everybody has a place to sit in this tiny room. And one of the fleeting details in this sutra that my soul attaches to is, all these 32,000 thrones and all these people are there — everybody's sitting in this little room — and the house is not deformed by this, and the block on which the house sits is not deformed by this, and the city is not deformed by this. And this seems like one of those small and telling details that this is not a practice about display, being special, and having lots of special things we do and special ways we do them. We are the ten by ten foot room that can contain 32,000 lion thrones and anybody walking by on the street outside wouldn't know. You know? Each of us is that ten by ten foot room, with all that beauty, richness, despair, difficulty, tragedy, triumph — all of it going on inside of us, and yet we live ordinary householders' lives. And that's important. And how that is important I think will become more clear as we go along.

So back to this stark confrontation with Vimalakirti lying on his sick bed. Here's the third radical thing, which is, when Vimalakirti begins to speak, he speaks a dharma of utter allegiance to this world. Absolute, unquestioning, unmitigated, uncomforted allegiance to the world, and his illness, in this case, is part of that, part of what he has absolute connection with in the way we're talking about connection, absolute allegiance to. So when we talk about Vimalakirti's being sick, for the purposes of this story it's a physical illness, but obviously it's speaking about any kind of dis-ease, any

kind of being off-balance that we experience in our lives, of whatever sort that's happening internally with us, is happening in our relationships with the world, happening in the world around us...whatever is tilty is what Vimalakirti is talking about as he talks about illness. And he's saying that that quality of tiltiness is fundamental to this world; how it can be a Pure Land already is that it is the tilty Pure Land. It is the Pure Land where things are constantly being rocked; where things are never quite finding center and balance, or maybe for an instant before they get knocked off again. So it's a world in constant motion and off-balanced-ness.

And Vimalakirti says what we have to do if we take up the way of 'not two' is to accept the offer that this world makes. The offer that this world makes is to be an unbalanced being in an unbalanced world and to dance that. How do we do that? And if the negative qualities of that are obvious — there's suffering, there's difficulty, things are hard sometimes — there's also an equal, positive quality of it which is the multiplicity of this world. There's so much going on. There's so many possibilities.

There's so much change all the time, so many things happening that part of the instability is a kind of creativity. So Vimalakirti's saying, I think, in my interpretation, we cannot just look at the instability of this world as the cause of suffering and difficulty. We also have to accept the instability of this world as the cause of creativity and responsiveness to the difficulty. Okay? And, as if to make the point, later on this sutra, our world, this tippy world, the tilty world, is contrasted with the world that's called Many Fragrances. And Vimalakirti makes contact with this World of Many Fragrances so that everybody in the room can see it, and it's a kind of beautiful, perfect, non-tilty world. So the sutra describes it as "all the inhabitants of this world built their halls and towers out of fragrances." Isn't that wonderful? "...strolled the fragrant ground, and had gardens all made of fragrances. The fragrant aroma of their food wafted to immeasurable worlds in the ten directions." And when this contact is made through whatever wormhole it was that Vimalakirti opened up, and the people who are in the World of Many Fragrances look at this world and go *Ugh. Wow, that looks tough!* And Vimalakirti says, "Don't make good and bad. That's the World of Many Fragrances. This is the tilty world!" Don't make good and bad. Don't rank. It's really important that we realize that the universe is that multiple, that full of many

different possibilities, and if we're here our job is to accept the offer of *this* World, and not just long for rebirth in the World of Many Fragrances.

I'm already out of time. There's so much to say. Maybe I'll just say one more thing, and then we'll close and keep going next week. So, especially in this kind of contrast between the tilty world and the World of Many Fragrances, one of the things that Vimalakirti is implying is that our job as bodhisattvas-in-training is not to think of the bodhisattva as a kind of template of perfection that we're going to squeeze ourselves into, we're going to somehow engineer or create us to be like a template. But, actually, in this world, in the tilty world, in the world of multiplicity, there are a gazillion different ways to be a bodhisattva. And in the sutra there's this huge list of all these different names for the bodhisattva, and I remember the first time I read this sutra years ago I thought *Oh, it's just part of that sort of tendency in the sutras to like elaborate, like, you know, the chiliocosms and the universes and all the wonderful names and the jewels and the flowers and the music and...* But I don't think that's true anymore. I think this is really actually a deep dharma point, which is there is not 'a' bodhisattva. There is Unblinking Bodhisattva, Wonderful Arm Bodhisattva, Jewel Hand Bodhisattva, Lion Mind Bodhisattva, Pure Emancipation Bodhisattva, Universal Maintenance Bodhisattva — which I particularly love, because it's like the great celestial janitor, right? — Jewel Courage Bodhisattva, Root of Joy Bodhisattva, Joyful Vision Bodhisattva, Sounds of Thunder Bodhisattva, Serene Capacity Bodhisattva, Store of Rich Bodhisattva, Delights In the Real Bodhisattva. And then there are three that really show that there is not a single template for our fully realized spiritual lives. There is the Viewing Equality Bodhisattva, the Viewing In Equality Bodhisattva, and the Viewing Equality and Inequality Bodhisattva!

Okay, so if you have a world of duality, two of those have to be wrong. You have to choose one, right? One of those bodhisattvas is right, and they all three can't be right. In 'not two,' they are all three possibilities; they are all three part of the creativity of the multiplicity of this world. So, I think that the invitation in this list — and this is like a fraction of this list of all these bodhisattvas — the invitation is to say, you are not trying to squeeze yourself into one template of what it means to be fully realized. You are looking to discover what your particular expression of that is. That's your job. In

the tilty world, your job is to use the multiplicity for the benefit of all, and to figure out whether you're Jeweled Hand Bodhisattva or Universal Maintenance Bodhisattva.

Okay?

So, alright, I will stop there because I want to leave some time for any kind of comments or questions, and then next week we'll come back to all of them confronting Vimalakirti lying there on the bed, and Manjushri asks him about his illness, and the first conversation they have is about the nature of illness and the nature of compassion in relationship to illness. For now, comments or questions, I would love to hear.

Q1 : How did everything appear in the room?

JIS : So, okay, I'm going to tell you a joke a little too early. Shariputra, who asked where is everybody going to sit, then Manjushri and Vimalakirti have this amazing dialog which we'll go through a little bit, and it comes to this sort of thunderous conclusion in Vimalakirti's silence.

And then the next chapter begins : "Shariputra looked at his watch and said, 'It's noon. How are we going to feed all these people?'" So Vimalakirti hears his thought and responds to it by opening this portal to the World of Many Fragrances, who then feed everybody in the room, who send down their food made of fragrances in a bowl that is never exhausted, no matter how many people eat from it. So it's Shariputra's growling stomach that brings it into the room.

Q2 : I just thought all this is happening with the fragrances and the food and the chairs, so everything's got a quality of place. But what's attracting people is the illness.

JIS : Do you want to say another word or two about that?

Q2 : Well, if they just said here is the World of Fragrances, here's the address, everyone would run to it, right?

JIS : Yeah.

Q2 : What is attracting them? And I think it's the endarkenment, which, which...the willingness to enter into that will allow things to fall into place.

JIS : Even though they have to be a little bit dragged, kicking and screaming, to it, it becomes the crucial encounter. Yeah. Absolutely.

Q3 : Is it the illness of the conversation of the illness?

JIS : That attracts them? They think it's the conversation, but it's the illness. I think. Yeah. I think there's a way in which they're looking for an out on the question of illness that they think will happen in this amazing dialog. And what happens is they discover that there's no easy out like that, and they have to actually live through it.

Q4 : Is Shariputra a 'straight man?' Is he?

JIS : In this sutra he is. But not in general. In general people thought very highly of him, so highly that Guanyin gives the *Heart Sutra* to him, speaks it to him. Right?

Q5 : It sounds like he's acting like the Universal Maintenance Bodhisattva.

JIS : Yeah. Just so. Thank you for that, because actually there's a way in which, as comedy often does, and really does in the koan tradition, he's doing the subvert and connect thing, right? He's subverting this sort of seriousness, and therefore making another connection possible. That kind of maintenance, yeah.

Q6 : I had the gift of being sick this week, but I didn't think of it that way. But if I remembered it, I think if I get sick this week I will see it in a different way.

JIS : Good. *I am sick because the whole world is sick.* That's what Vimalakirti said, right?

Q7 : The pure land is here. It doesn't matter, it's perceptual. When you said that it reminded me of what Dōgen says that when you're in the middle of the ocean and you look toward the shore, it's round and nothing else. But when you get close to the shore, it has infinite variety. It's like a jewel and a palette and everyone and everything is like that. There is a universe everywhere, even the dewdrop.

JIS : Yeah. Anything that must be said before we close?