

Vimalakirti, 4
Joan Sutherland
Cerro Gordo Temple ~ Santa Fe, NM
May 12, 2011

Good evening, bodhisattvas!

We are in the story of *The Sutra that Vimalakirti Spoke*. When we last left Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, and his retinue had come to Vimalakirti's place to inquire after his health, since he was sick, and this conversation between Vimalakirti and Manjushri has begun.

Vimalakirti was considered a great bodhisattva. He was a householder, a layperson, in contrast to this giant gathering of people who came to see him. And Manjushri inquires how he is and what's going on. And one of the questions he asks him is, "What is the cause of your illness?" And Vimalakirti says, "The cause from which my illness arises is great compassion." So, that's kind of interesting. He doesn't say a whole lot more than that, so we'll unpack that in a little bit.

When you have something called 'great' in the Chinese tradition, it's not just sort of an empty adjective of praise or appreciation. There was very much a sense of seeing things from both a great and small aspect simultaneously. And there wasn't any ranking of that. It wasn't like great was good and small was not so good. They were equally important aspects of anything. So, we know that Vimalakirti was engaged in small compassion all the time. If we think of small compassion being local compassion with the stuff we actually do, the stuff that is embodied in the world — it's the ways in which we live in this local zone that include the rocks and all the organic matter under our feet, that thin layer of life on this rocky planet, and the thin layer of gas that allows us to breathe and to live. And all of the things we do in that small, fragile, precious zone of life that involves our relationships with other beings in which we with our flesh attempt to deal in kind and helpful and decent and good ways with the flesh of others : of other humans, of other animals, the flesh of plants, even the flesh of nuclear reactors. Where we are really using our embodiedness, our materiality, to affect the embodiedness and materiality of others — that's the local view of compassion. And we know from the story of Vimalakirti that he spent a lot of time walking the back alleys and the dark

streets of the city just outside of which the Buddha was encamped with all of his disciples. And he was going places of those dark alleys and back streets that most of the holy disciples of the Buddha would never have been caught dead, because they were afraid. They weren't afraid for their physical safety so much as they were afraid for their spiritual safety. They thought that to be there — to walk those streets, to see what you would see and engage with what you would engage with in those places — represented some kind of essential threat to their deepest spiritual desire, which was to get out of this zone between the organic matter under our feet and the gases over our head, that for them felt like a realm of great suffering.

Vimalakirti was not afraid in that way. In fact, quite the opposite. Vimalakirti knew that the only way to be a bodhisattva of this thin film of life on this planet was exactly to be afraid to walk nowhere, to be willing to walk anywhere, and to extend a hand wherever it was possible to do so. This made him really scary to the holiest disciples of the Buddha, because not only was he doing that, but it wasn't bothering him.

He was sick but he wasn't suffering, and that's a very important distinction. So when I spin out the story of Vimalakirti in my head, I wonder if walking those back alleys and into those difficult places — did he catch TB? Did he get knifed? Did he get beaten up? What happened? What was the proximate cause of his sickness? But whatever it was it did not translate into suffering for him, because he was doing exactly what he believed was the essential thing as a bodhisattva to do. And if that compassion made him sick, well, that just brought him closer to the world. That brought him more in touch with the way many people live, and brought him exactly to those places where he might be helpful. We are most helpful where people are in trouble, where animals are in trouble, where plants are in trouble, where nuclear reactors are in trouble. That's where we're most helpful — where's there's trouble. And he was not afraid of that.

So, this is the small aspect of compassion. Again, no value judgment, quite the opposite. The detailed, the particular, that's what small means. The 'this one' and 'this one' and 'this one.' It takes 'this shape' and 'this shape' and 'this shape.' Each one very particular, each one very specific, each one local, each one involving flesh on flesh — that's what small means.

So, how was it that he was able to engage in these constant small, radiant acts of compassion and get sick even from doing it, but not suffer? What was that? What kept that gap from being crossed? My sense of it is that that's where we get into the realm of 'great

compassion.’ What’s that that he’s talking about? What is that way of not a different kind of compassion but a different aspect of the same compassion that gets expressed in small ways all the time? What’s the other view, the simultaneous view, that helps us perform those small acts without taking on suffering as a result?

So, Manjushri goes on to ask him some more questions, to explain about “what do you mean by your illness arising from great compassion?” So Manjushri first asks him three questions, and the first one is : What is compassion? And Vimalakirti answers, “Whatever good you do is completely shared with all beings.” So this is the first thing that Vimalakirti says about seeing compassion from the viewpoint of great compassion. He said before that “I am sick because the whole world is sick. I am ill because all beings are ill.” This is what he just said previously. So this is one way of saying *I share the condition of all beings*. And then he says, “whatever good you do is completely shared with all beings.” He’s saying the other side of that. He’s saying, *and I share my condition with all beings*. There’s an exchange going on.

And, this is not a view that I think is pretty common of compassion that it’s about the bestowing something on somebody or somebody’s else — that you give something to somebody else. It’s more like Vimalakirti is saying *You have to open up the gates and let it flow in both directions. You have to be willing to let the world affect you*. As we’ve spoken about in the past compassion is allowing yourself to be willing to be pierced by life. So you open the gate and you let life affect you, and you also let yourself affect life. You also let what is good flow out and affect other beings. There’s an implied commitment there.

Whatever good you do... how do we know what is good? How are we able to do good? There’s an implied commitment there to do the work so that what flows from us has a quality of good about it. What’s good? Well, how would we define good in terms of compassion? Probably not pure, probably not ‘right,’ probably more things like helpful, kind, having an effect that seems to bring something better into life. And, in fact, the next two questions that Manjushri asks and that Vimalakirti gives speak to this.

We won’t get there tonight, but the next thing that Manjushri asks him is : “What is renunciation?” And Vimalakirti says, “The blessings generated are without expectation.” So, for what we’re saying right now, there is the assumption that there can be blessings generated by what we do. And then Manjushri asks the last question : “What is joy?” And Vimalakirti says, “If there is benefit, you rejoice without regret.” So, if something good happens, be

happy. Enjoy that. Let that exchange flow back to you. There is in this large view of compassion some really important assumptions, like, it is possible to be helpful. It is possible to do things that have benefit, and if that happens that is an unreservedly good thing. And the questions becomes how do we understand 'good'? How do we evaluate 'good'? And that's what we spend our whole lives really trying to understand to come to see.

Another important part about what Vimalakirti says is : "whatever good you do." From the viewpoint of great compassion, this is not about how you feel, it's about what you do. That's really, really important, because often we subsume compassion only to the feeling realm. We feel sadness, we feel sorrow, we feel righteous indignation, we feel pity. And then we want to be helpful, we want to do something about that. Vimalakirti is saying, from this view of great compassion, how you feel is not the important thing. What you do is the important thing.

Let's talk a little about some of the implications of that. You might remember that Huang Bo, one of the Chinese teachers, at some point said, "Feeling compassion is knowing there's no one to be saved." So, that's the first thing. You can't have an idea that there are things and people who are fundamentally different than you that fall into the category of 'those who need to be saved' and yourself falling into the category of the 'one what's going to save.' You have to completely abandon that feeling state, that opinion, about what the deal is. The deal is that we are all here in this thin band of life between rock and space, and we lift each other up and we push each other down, and we help, and we don't help, and that goes around and around and around.

It's interesting that in the traditional formulations about compassion, it's opposite. Every virtue has its opposite. The opposite of compassion is aggression and violence. Again, emphasis on what you do, not what you feel. Aggression and violence are acts. They come out of feeling states, but what's important about them is the act. What's important about compassion is the act, is what it does. So, the maybe startling suggestion in the great view of compassion that Vimalakirti is presenting is : you don't have to feel empathy to be compassionate, you don't have to understand, all you have to do is act. It's possible to be really angry with someone and still be compassionate. It's possible to feel indifference and still be compassionate. How you act is not connected to your opinion about it nor how you feel about it. Compassion is a larger calling. It's a voice from a bigger space that says, *No matter how feel or don't feel, act anyway! Be helpful, anyway.*

Another part of this view of great compassion is that we move from the quest of the holy disciples of the Buddha, which is how to escape suffering, to Vimalakirti's quest which is how to live in the presence of suffering, how not to turn away from it. When we move toward living in the presence of suffering, another piece of great compassion is : how we don't have it full-blown and complete right from the very beginning — that compassion is first that movement toward the world, away from your separate escape pod, and toward an engagement with the world. That's already compassion. That's not the way to compassion, that's not practicing toward compassion, already, that's compassion. And then, as you work to be able to respond in ways that are helpful regardless of how you feel, that's compassion, too. Even if you don't feel empathy, that's already compassion. Compassion from that view is the willingness to stay open even when you don't understand, even when you don't empathize. Maybe you don't even want to be open, but you do, anyway. And, just the act of staying open, just the willingness to engage — even without complete sympathy or understanding — that's full-blown compassion right there, because that's as much as you can do. And so, because it's as much as you can do, it's all of it.

This is hard work. It takes a lot of courage, and it requires a kind of continual surrendering to the real, no matter how you feel about it. And, if you surrender, Vimalakirti is saying, good things can happen, but it's not an ego project. It's not about feeling like I'm doing the right thing. That's not what this is for. This is really about *Everything I do that is good I give away to benefit the world. Whatever good you do is completely shared with all beings*. Imagine that : whatever good you do, whatever is good in you, whatever skills you have, whatever arts you have, whatever largeness you have, whatever smallness you have...whatever is *good* you completely share with all beings. You don't hoard it, you don't save it, you give it away over and over and over again. That's the view of great compassion. That's the amazing request Vimalakirti is making of us.

When we disappear into the world like that, when it's not an ego project, when it's not about looking good, or even feeling good, even feeling self-satisfied, when it's completely disappearing — where you become a gate, where whatever is good flows out like that into your ordinary life, into the ordinary life around you, when we're just living our compassion rather than grabbing compassion and making it part of some ego project, then compassion is no longer something we are, but part of what the world is. That's what we can bring to the

world, and it's not about us. It's not who we are. It's that in so doing, we make *that* part of what the world *is*. And that's how we change the world, little by little by little, flesh on flesh on flesh, encounter after encounter after encounter.

So, the assumption from the view of great compassion is that the good we do belongs to the world, not to ourselves. That's where it belongs. And our task is to allow it to flow into the world and change the world, to make that part of the world is as much as we possibly can. So, that's the view of great compassion. That's the very radical, very rigorous view of compassion that if wrestled with, if struggled with, if accepted and rejected and accepted again and thrown over and surrendered to in our lives, stands at the gap between being sick and suffering, and enables us to be sick without suffering, enables us — in other word — to be alive without feeling like that's fundamentally a problem. And that's what Vimalakirti's view offers us if we're willing to wrestle with it, struggle with it, and see the extent to which we can take that on.

So, I feel like that's a lot and pretty important, and I'd like to stop here and welcome any kind of comments, questions, objections, strenuous arguments in other directions that you might have.

Q1 : I first came here around 1980 or 81 with Richard Baker and [others], and several years later I am head of temple here in San Francisco. I started going there Wednesday nights, and they would have weekend sittings every third week starting Friday at six o'clock ending at Sunday 6 o'clock. And I remember this one time that I really struggled to get there on time. And all of a sudden another monk showed up to conduct the sit. So the following Wednesday I went to the sit and Issan was there and he said, "Oh, how are you?" And I said, "Well, I'm really pissed off because, you know, you were supposed to conduct this weekend and you weren't there." And, he said, "Oh, yeah, you know, I was really rushing to get ready for it, and on the way here, I saw a man in the gutter covered in shit and vomit, so I picked him up and took him upstairs to my room and washed him. I took care of him over the weekend." And, that really shifted my point of view. Anyway, a year or two later, the HIV epidemic hit San Francisco really bad. Issan started the hospice and he encouraged all of us to sit with the dying. So, that was really interesting, and then he started dying. So, we were sitting with him. It was really interesting because there were three or four people in the room

where he was dying and somebody came in and said, "Issan, I'm really going to miss you." And he said, "Really? Why? Where are you going?" So this person was really interesting. He was a gutter worker. He was a gutter worker.

JIS : He was maybe the great embodiment of 'I am sick because the whole world is sick.' I guess he made not a hair's breadth separation.

Q1 : He had all these people from the gutter, taking care of them as they were dying.

JIS : And, in the end, he died with them.

Q1 : But he died enlightened, you know, "Where are *you* going?"

JIS : Absolutely. Thank you for bringing him in. He's the perfect guardian angel for this.

Q2 : That notion that compassion is action brings to mind the image of the thousand-armed Guanyin, with the tools and ropes and snares and lifesavers. It's about action.

JIS : Yeah.

Q3 : Were you saying that intention doesn't really matter, just do it?

JIS : No. I don't think it's saying that at all. But I think it's saying *how you feel about it* doesn't matter as much as you think it does. So, that's why there's the thought that you can be compassionate without being sympathetic or empathetic. That it's possible to do something, to help even if your feelings at the moment aren't completely in alignment with that. It's less important that you line your feelings up than that you act. But, it feels to me like that's a huge commitment of intention. That separate from feeling, there's a distinction being made between what your intention is and how you feel about it. You intend to do it, anyway. And, I think that's so important for us because we are becoming a culture in which our feelings have to always line up with everything we do, you know? We call it fancy words like authenticity (excuse me!), and this is sort of like an ancient, weird voice saying, *Not necessarily. Not necessarily.*

Q4 : So, is it that if you're feeling a certain way, isn't that like identifying with the content of the consciousness rather than the consciousness itself? So, if you're worried about doing something because you don't feel up to it, you're trapped in a way in attachment to that feeling. Whereas, if you stay in the consciousness and watch the feeling but do it, anyway, well, then, you're doing practice. I mean that's where the practice is, isn't it?

JIS : Yeah. Definitely.

Q5 : To make sure I understand, you're saying your thoughts don't matter as much as you think they do? So, for example, in the story that this gentleman just told about helping the man in the gutter, if the person who is helping, instead of coming from a place of [emotion], he was pissed off or something like that, wouldn't that change the entire experience, not only for the person but also for the person who was receiving?

JIS : Sure. It would change it, but I think the suggestion would be : the guy got out of the gutter and cleaned up, and maybe saved his life. So, that's good enough. Yeah.

Q6 : For me, the question arises, what does keep us, me separated from any part of the world? What does keep me focused in a way that keeps me separate from contributing in that way? It's like the opposite of asking what is compassionate. What arises that keeps compassion from happening?

JIS : What does?

Q6 : It could be a lot of different things. It's like part of that inquiry into where we're at and where our limitations are, where we feel limited.

JIS : I think there's that inquiry and that clearing away of what gets in the way, and there's also the reaching across all of that, anyway, in the meantime. You know? And, allowing the experience of reaching across all of our limitations, and doing it, anyway, informs us. Let that exchange affect us, so that suddenly we realize that that's possible. And somehow the stuff that's in the way just feels less important once you've made the connection, less compelling.

Q7 : I think what it also requires in the most difficult places is that you're, if you're feelings aren't lining up what needs to be done, that tension is going to be awkward. It's not graceful, and it's not under control, and that's not a comfortable place to be, to be kind of krunky or messy or...people I was working with this morning that completely went a different way than I felt it was going to go, so...but I wasn't quite in a graceful place with that. And then, I could see how I had nothing to do; that's not what is needed right now. But, I still had an irritation, and I thought, *boy, I hope I can still respond in a way that means something*. So, it felt krunky and it wasn't very comfortable.

JIS : And...

Q7 : Well, I don't know what they thought. It ended okay, I think. And someday I'll talk to them, but I think it isn't always what's needed, and I know that, but there are times where I'll sit and feel brought up short by that.

JIS : So, then always that ability to say, *Well! That was klunky and uncomfortable, and I'm not sure what happened there. And that's alright; that's what it was. That's what skillful means look like in that moment, because that was as much as it was.* And, is there a way in which what feels like the tension of a disconnect between what you expected and what actually happened can that become a creative tension? Can any tension become a creative tension? Possibly? Are there some tensions that maybe can't, and you just have to back away, and that's as good as it got. But, yeah, just what you're saying. So, we do it *anyway*.

Q7 : I had three of those kinds of interactions this week that had those same dynamics. And I'm recognizing it faster, and it's not like I have better words suddenly, it's not that. But I think each time there's a sense of *Oh, this is going to be okay.* When I have that moment of krunkiness...well, let's see where we are.

JIS : Yeah, and fundamentally I think Vimalakirti's at the mortality and morbidity meeting to decide like what just happened, you know? Right? What Vimalakirti would ask was *What were we going for? Did you walk away feeling, oh, I did a good job? Or did you walk away feeling something good happened?* And that's the exact Vimalakirti thing. It's about did something good happen, not how am I feeling.

Q8 : It seems to me this example of or this comment about finding the difficult to be compassionate speaks to what Vimalakirti said that he's sick because the world is sick. I had an experience that I was very sick and I went to the clinic, and because I was a walk-in, I was essentially put through the third degree : Are you really sick? Why are you here? And then, the nurse practitioner called on her phone, and she asks, "Do you have time to see somebody?" Not "somebody's really sick, can you see them?" Then in the meantime, there were two 5 or 6 minute visits to that office, and I thought *Well, okay.* Then, I finally got into the office and most of the time the NP was on the computer writing all this information down, and that seemed really like an incidental part of the whole process. And I kept thinking, *Hmmm, that's interesting. No contact. No connection.* Just facts and information, and I feel like the whole focus was self-protection. I felt like the clinic was protecting itself by putting all the data down rather than paying attention to the fact that I was sick. The fact that I was sick, the

examination lasted for about two minutes. So, it's difficult for me to be compassionate. Is it because I am sick because the world is sick? In other words, I find it difficult to be compassionate because I don't find compassion.

JIS : Do you need to find compassion in order to feel compassion?

Q8 : I don't know. No, not necessarily. But I think the example, particularly in the corporate world, is *We're not interested in that part. We're interested in getting things done.*

JIS : And then, there's what you're interested in. Stay with that.

Q9 : I want to understand the part of the story about the bodhisattvas who didn't want to go see Vimalakirti. And the bodhisattvas who are afraid to walk in the dark alleys. What's the story with bodhisattvas? Why are they not showing up?

JIS : This was written at a time that the idea about what a bodhisattva was was really changing, and the whole pivot point of the change was from kind of trying to work out your own to get out, to turning toward the world, and staying in the world to help everybody find a ticket together.

Okay, we should probably close. Thank you very much.