

Vimalakirti, 8  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

We're continuing with *The Sutra that Vimalakirti Spoke*, a text about two thousand years old that had a profound influence on the creation of the koan tradition in China several hundred years after that, which is our root tradition. The sutra takes place largely, at least in the middle sections, in Vimalakirti's room in a city in Northern India. He's a householder and a bodhisattva, which means a person who has, although having attained a great awakening themselves, dedicated that awakening to the benefit of all beings, and so remains in the world working toward the awakening of everybody. And, he's sick, so Manjushri, who is the Bodhisattva of Insightful Wisdom, has come to pay a call on him in his illness, bringing along 30,000 or more of his closest friends.

So, these thirty-some thousand bodhisattvas and private buddhas, a term that will come up tonight — a private buddha in contrast to a bodhisattva is someone who is also seeking enlightenment, but for their own benefit, so that they can get off the wheel of birth and death and remain in Nirvana. So, for the private buddhas of the Buddhist world, Buddhism is an amusement park where the ticket gets you *off* the ride. The bodhisattvas, on the other hand, remain steadfastly on the ride, no matter how seasick they get, until everybody else is off, too.

All these bodhisattvas and private buddhas have assembled in Vimalakirti's ten by ten foot room, and the whole sutra in this middle section (and in the rest of it, as well) takes the form of one conversation after another. These conversations in all these different permutations — sometimes Manjushri and Vimalakirti have a conversation, sometimes Shariputra, who's one of the bodhisattvas and kind of represents that whole gang of people there, has a conversation with Vimalakirti, sometimes Shariputra talks with the goddess who lives in the room, in Vimalakirti's room, with him. And tonight, we're going to focus on what's considered the culmination of all of those conversations, and interestingly enough, it ends in a thunderous

silence, one of the most famous silences in all of this literature, which still reverberates down to us 2000 years later.

This is a conversation about nonduality, which everything else has been more or less, in one form or another. Vimalakirti says to these thirty-some thousand assembled, followers of the way, “How does the bodhisattva go about entering the gate of nonduality? Let each of you explain it as you understand it.” Many of them step forward and they offer first a duality, and then they offer a resolution of that duality, usually through a kind of philosophical discourse, which is probably less interesting to us than it was to them. But I want to read just a partial list of the dualities that got brought forward, because it gives us a sense of the pervasiveness of dualistic thinking, the way we just make dualities all the time. If we remember back to the words of the goddess when she’s speaking to Shariputra, when they’re talking about the nature of flowers, and he’s saying that flowers are not in accord with the Dharma, and the goddess says, “It is not the flowers that are not in accord with the Dharma. It is your mind that is not in accord with the Dharma,” if you think that. And so just look at all the ways our mind makes dualities. Here’s a short list :

Birth and death

Darkness and light

Self and other

I and mine

Self and no-self

Grasping and rejecting

Perception and nonperception

Defilement and purity

True and false

Mind and thought

Form and formless

Bodhisattva aspirations and private buddha aspirations

Good and bad

Blame and blessing

Bondage and liberation

Passion and the absence of passion

Wisdom and ignorance

Created and uncreated

Worldly and unworldly

Samsara and nirvana (which is to say the world of birth and death and the world of the absence of birth and death — the birthless world)

To yearn for nirvana and to not delight in the world

Exhaustible and inexhaustible

Enlightenment and ignorance

Correct way and erroneous way

Form and emptiness

Real and unreal

The four elements — earth, water, fire, and wind — and emptiness or space

I and the objects it observes

Ear and sounds

Nose and smells

Body and tangible things

Mind and phenomena

These dualities come not just in twos, they come in other forms, too, so buddha, dharma, and sangha are offered as a duality — that's interesting.

Meritorious actions and transgressive actions and doing nothing are offered as a duality.

So, an indication of how much time we spend sorting things into piles and then labeling the piles, basically, according to our sense of what they mean to us. They give all of these specific instances of dualities and how to resolve them. So, how to enter this gate of nonduality, and here you have a working-out of duality in the form world, in the world of our daily lives, which includes the thought world. So, the world of our thoughts, feelings, reactions, events, and physical sensations and how we deal with dualities one by one, by one, by one, as we go through the moments of our day and all these different dualities arise. The first part of the conversation is this multiplicity, this all-pervasiveness of a dualistic view of the world.

Then they all — the multiplicity, the many — ask the one Manjushri, who is this embodiment of insightful wisdom, “How does the bodhisattva enter the gate of nonduality?”

What's the view of insightful wisdom which is the bright, clear, empty as opposed to the world of the many, of multiplicity? Manjushri replies,

As I understand it, it is to be without words, without explanations, without expression, without cognition, transcending all questions and answers. This is to enter the gate of nonduality.

So, the bodhisattvas, having brought forth the many, the multiplicity of ways we experience dualities in the world, Manjushri goes *whoosh!* and just sweeps it all back into emptiness. He says how you enter that gate of nonduality is you just don't have words, you don't have explanations, you don't have thoughts. You just sweep it all back into emptiness.

There's a contrast here between the careful inquiry of the world of form and the negation of everything in the world of emptiness that Manjushri represents. And, implicit in Manjushri's view is a choice of one over the other, right? Which is the imposition of yet another duality even as we're discussing how to enter the gate of nonduality. I mean, it's just so difficult to escape! And that's part of the point.

Okay, so then Manjushri turns to Vimalakirti, the sick householder bodhisattva, and if Manjushri represents insightful wisdom, Vimalakirti represents wisdom that includes the heart, that includes compassion. I don't want to set it up as a kind of heart-mind duality, but more like what it's like if you have Manjushri's insight, but you include the warmth of the heart? And the fearlessness of the heart? One of the ways maybe we can sort of sum up the difference between Manjushri and Vimalakirti is Manjushri lives in an emerald, green palace, full of light, and cold, hard, perfect, and unchanging like a gem stone. And Vimalakirti was known for prowling the back alleys of the town he lived in, hanging out in wine shops and brothels, down at the docks, and places like that.

So, Manjushri from the emerald palace says to Vimalakirti, hanging out in the back alleys : "Each of us has given an explanation. Now, sir, it is your turn to speak. How does the bodhisattva enter the gate of nonduality?"

At this point, Vimalakirti remained silent, saying nothing.

Manjushri sighed and said, "Excellent, excellent! Not a word. Nothing spoken. This truly is to enter the gate of nonduality."

So, I want to look at the nature of Vimalakirti's silence, because it's tremendously important. First, you may remember — those of you who have been coming to these talks —

that at a certain point in the conversation between Shariputra, representing the bodhisattvas, and the goddess, the goddess asks him how long he's been liberated, how long he's been awakened? But he won't answer her question. There's a kind of silence, right? She asks him why, why won't he speak, why is he remaining silent?

And he says, "Liberation can't be spoken of in words, and so I don't know what I can say to you."

Then she replies, "Words and writing are manifestations of liberation. All things that exist are manifestations of liberation." She's saying, *you're making words specially bad; they're somehow a duality with liberation — they can't express liberation*. And she's saying, *Ridiculous! Words are like anything else*: "...everything else is speaking the Dharma all the time." This is a silence that is an inability to speak. Shariputra can't speak. He doesn't know how to speak. He's locked in a kind of duality where he thinks it's better not to speak, that that is somehow truer to liberation not to speak. So, he's falling short of being able to speak.

Vimalakirti's silence, on the other hand, is not an inability to speak, but a kind of affirmation. It's not the absence of something, it's not the absence of words or the absence of speaking, but the presence of something else. I want to talk some about that something else. In Vimalakirti's silence there's an invitation to find a way to express what is inexpressible, to *eff* what is ineffable. And that is one of the foundational invitations of the koan way. Yes, it's inexpressible. Yes, there's no way to really do it justice, you think. All of that is true. Do it *anyway*. Express the inexpressible. If you can't describe it, if you can't explain it, all the better. Don't try to describe it. Don't try to explain it. Show it. Demonstrate it. Become an instance of it yourself, and that, again, is crucial to the koan way. Express the thing itself, express the inexpressible yourself. Do it in a way that it becomes visible, apparent, manifest to all of us.

From the koan perspective, that's the deepest kind of conversation we can have. And you don't have to make a big production to have it, but it's those moments when we're speaking with each other, we're in each other's presence, we're doing something together, we're just looking at each, we're looking together at a sunset, or we're helping someone who's just had a car accident — whatever it is — those moments when we are with everything we are, expressing the inexpressible and there's nothing missing and there's no need to make a commentary about it or tell a story about it — it's all right there. It's all contained in what we might call the 'event field,' which is the field in which any event is happening. As we have

spoken of so many times, that field in which any event, any moment is occurring is a vast thing, full of many things. We add our expression of the inexpressible to that field and it becomes part of it.

The first thing, then, is that Vimalkirti's silence is not an inability to speak like Shariputra's was. It's also not a negation, like Manjushri's was. Manjushri says get rid of words, get rid of speech, get rid of explanation, get rid of cognition, don't even think — everything is negated. What has been produced is swept away, is called inadequate and turned away from. But Vimalakirti's silence is in no sense a negation like that. As I said a few minutes ago, it's the *presence* of something, not the *absence* of something. So, we might say that it's an invitation, that silence, into the moment before either the inability to speak or the negation of any kind of speech.

It's as if Vimalakirti is saying, *The gate into nonduality isn't in front of you, it's behind you.* And all you have to do is step back through it, into that space. And, I think the importance of that is already there. We already know it. We know that space. It's behind us all the time. We've been there, and all we have to do is to step back into it, into that space. And in that space, what is affirmed, rather than Manjushri's negation, is that in that moment before, we either can't do something or we're trying to figure out what we ought to do, or we're trying to express it, or we're trying to, trying to, trying to, trying to, trying to... In the moment *before*, anything is possible, because we haven't narrowed it down by thinking either we can't do anything, or we have to do something, and now we have to figure out what we have to do. Before we enter into any of those kinds of thought processes, anything is possible because everything is present in that moment before. Nothing is excluded. We haven't narrowed things down. We haven't said *Not this or that, but somewhere in here I've got to figure it out.*

So, it's an affirmation of what can become possible from that space, rather than a negation of what happens when you step out of it, which is what Manjushri is doing. Vimalakirti is saying, *Don't step, yet. Don't step, yet. What happens in that larger space?* And here is one of the most crucial misunderstandings about the nature of Chan and Zen and the koan tradition, which is usually around the ways it gets expressed as 'no self' or 'no mind' or all those kind of negative things. Because, again, those things are not pointing to the absence of something, the absence of a self, or the absence of a mind, but they're talking about *this moment just before*, that

Vimalakirti's talking about, when we step back through the gate, when everything is present and anything is possible.

There was another text that was introduced in China at about the same time as *The Sutra That Vimalakirti Spoke*, called *The Diamond Sutra*, and in there it describes what then happens as "Abiding nowhere, let the heart-mind come forth." Abiding nowhere, let the heart-mind come forth. That quote from *The Diamond Sutra* became a koan that we still use to this very day. Some of you have worked with that. So, what is that? What is "Abiding nowhere, let the heart-mind come forth?" What's the invitation there? I think it is a recognition that we've talked about how each event, each moment that we are walking into is an event field, is a vast field. In fact, we could say that the moment stretches from one end of the universe and to the other, and before the beginning of time til after the end of time. That's this present moment. So, if every moment is an event field like that, within us, too, is a vast field. Within us, too, is a vast field where we have all of our own personal history, everything we've come to understand and know and to feel and to experience, all of our skills and all the places where we're not so good, and all of that, but where we also connect to the vastness ourselves. And we bring that field into any moment, any event we enter. One of the ways to think about how we step out that moment before and into the event field is : How do we bring this field we carry in us into the field of the moment? And do we find where they connect, where they interpermeate? How are they continuous? How is what we bring continuous with what else is happening in the field?

Abiding nowhere is the moment just before, and what that's talking about is, what's it is like to be in that moment before where nothing's happened yet and so everything is possible — and not to take a position. What if you don't take a position? That's what abiding nowhere means. What if you don't think that the first thing you gotta do about anything is have a viewpoint about it? Right? What's my angle? How am I coming at this, how am I lining up with this? All of those kinds of questions. What do I think about this? What's my opinion? What's my assumption?

What if you *don't take a position*? What if you abide nowhere? And, again, that's not pointing to the absence of something so much — the absence of a viewpoint or a position — as it is saying, if you don't take that position or that viewpoint, everything you are, the whole

field of you, gets brought into the situation equally, because you haven't chosen some things over other things.

So, it's this invitation to bring the whole field of everything you know, everything you feel, everything your body knows, every experience you've had, all of your understanding — to bring *all of that, equally*, to the situation, without picking and choosing ahead of time. *I'm going to lead with this*, or *I'm gonna use this tool kit, the tool kit I use in this situation*, but the whole thing, together. “Abiding nowhere,” allowing everything to be brought equally into the situation without narrowing it down ahead of time, “let the heart-mind come forth.” That's important. Again, it's an affirmation of what becomes possible when we do that. Let it rip. Express it. Be an instance of it. Get into the field, bring what you can bring, and see what can happen as a result.

We are in no way being asked to be empty in the sense of vacant or hollow. We're being asked to abide nowhere, without a fixed position, so that exactly the whole field of the self is engaged in the moment. We step back into the moment before, we find that place of abiding nowhere, and *whoosh* all of that comes forward into the moment — our whole field engaging with the whole field.

One way we've talked about that is from a poem of another Chinese householder ancestor, named Mahasattva Fu, from roughly the same time period, who began a poem with the line, “With empty hands, I take hold of the plow.” That's exactly the same thing. With empty hands — with hands that have not been limited by what I've already decided, my hands abiding nowhere, which means, my hands which hold all possibilities because I haven't narrowed it down — take hold of the plow. Lift up the child, type away on the computer, till the garden, whatever it is, those empty hands connect with, interpermeate with the world, and *something happens* as a result.

In the space of the moment before, which is the space that Vimalakirti's thunderous silence is inviting us into, we're including everything, we're taking place with everything. And that space, where we've stepped backwards through the gate, because we've stepped backwards through the gate, connects with the vastness, because that's what that space is. That space is where we touch the vastness. We're stepping back into that, that place we know, that place that's always available to us, and it connects *forward* into the world, into the event that's about to happen. So, there we stand in the moment before, connecting in both



directions, everything being present, everything inside of us as well as everything outside of us, and then we walk. Then we use our empty hands to do something. It's as if, rather than retreating, quite the opposite. We're finding that place from which to launch ourselves, as it were, into the moment.

That's the foolishness of a whole lot of words about Vimalakirti's silence. But I would appreciate any comments or questions you might have.

Q1 : You speak the foolish words so well.

JIS : Thank you.

Q2 : I kept thinking 'event horizon.' So, what is it that feels so different sometimes about the event field? Who we are, our position, all the ways we're interpreting things, and how does that lose contact with that event horizon, or that place where there's just complete openness of experience?

JIS : One of the things that Vimalakirti is saying that is so revolutionary, and which really gets taken up in the koan way is, *You know what? We don't have to figure that out. All we have to do is take a step back into that space before all that stuff arose.* As soon as we notice it arising we don't have to figure out, why do I always feel that way? Why is that always my reaction? What happened in my childhood that caused me to respond this way? You don't have to do any of that, which is not to say that that's not valuable in some other way, but it's also possible to just step back, step back into the moment before. Let it all rise and let it all fall away again, and feel what it's like when those things are not organizing how we behave, what we do, how we feel about things, and what we think. That's a revolutionary idea, and here's this practice that actually enables us to do it again, and again, and again, and again, and again until it becomes quite natural.

Q3 : This feels somewhat different from the neither for nor against? Could you talk about that?

JIS : Yeah. We were just in a retreat last week where one of the themes we were looking at was, what would it be like if you met every moment, everything that happened in the retreat with an attitude of neither for nor against? And what would it be like if you met yourself with neither for nor against? Which, first of all, makes visible how many times a minute we have judgments and opinions that we can respond to with neither for nor against.

And that's nonduality, because what happens in this sutra is all the many bodhisattvas represent all of the ways we deal with duality all the time, and the ways we're trying to resolve it, and that's real in our lives. And then Manjushri represents the sort of empty perspective where you just negate it all. *It's all empty.* And then, Vimalakirti says, *What's the thing that's neither for nor against? What's a nonduality that isn't picking one side or the other as the way to go? If that's A and B, what's C?* And, I think that's what's so powerful about that silence. What's it like before we get into all that stuff, and we think we either have to work it out or negate it? Put that down. Just put that down, back away from 'for or against,' back away from making piles, and stand in that space where none of that has happened yet. What's the freedom of that place?

Q3 : So, that's the same.

JIS : Yeah. Absolutely. Do you have a felt sense of that?

Q4 : I think about the times where I didn't have words, and pressure I felt to put words to things, and how unhelpful that is. And, how much the world pushes, or it seems that way, to take a stand, to take a position, to speak, be decisive. I saw the-no-words-place as a weakness, and I think some of it was it felt like I was in this constellation of things that I couldn't formulate, and that's often how it feels in my experience. But I think what I did out of that was I lived through, just not the same as stepping back... because you're stepping back into more engagement and not a kind of protective stance or withdrawal.

JIS : Yeah, okay. And there's also a thing that comes up with the koans where, you were genuinely trying to respond to the inquiry that was being made of you — you know, express yourself, make it clear, know your mind — but that wasn't what was true. That wasn't the true question that corresponded to what you were experiencing. And so, the koans will do that to you. They'll ask you a question, and at a certain point you have to say, *Wait a minute! That's not the point! You know, I'm not going to fall for that question, right? I'm going to step back, and I'm going to feel my way through all the stuff you were talking about, what your experience actually is, and I'm going to express that. And that's my response.* Right?

Q5 : If I kind of evoke or imagine stepping back, one of the images I have are little impulses that flicker. And, if something in me attaches to one of those impulses, it would move in a direction and, I think, kind of lead and would then move into this other communicative reach or something and into form, or something like that. I don't know if I have a question.

JIS : Can I try to respond to what I think the question is inside of that? So, one of the things that stepping back into that really big space makes possible is, we can become aware so much more clearly of those impulses, those little lights. And then, the question becomes not what do I want to do but what wants to happen? Right? That's what's possible in that space. It's such a huge difference. And then you just go with it, you know? And see what happens.

Q7 : With my photography I remember the teaching, "I am not the doer" often, and to be extremely present for the people I am with, co-creating and to open up to a space where I'm not trying to push an agenda on something, but to help them to be as comfortable as possible and help them to express as much as they can.

JIS : Absolutely. And so then it's like the photograph arises out of the whole field, right?

Q7: And it's so much not trying so hard and just letting it.

JIS : Yeah. Anything else? Thank you, all.