

Vimalakirti, 9  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

Tonight is the last night, as far as I know, at this moment, that we'll be spending with *The Sutra That Vimalakirti Spoke*. I wanted to leave you with one image that comes towards the end of the sutra, and then, some of you have spoken about how this sutra has meant a lot to you and been a source of something good, and I would love to hear any comments about that, about what you take away from the months we've spent with this sutra.

The image from the end happens after this debate about nonduality — that's the culmination of the many conversations that go on in the text. And then there's a lunch break because Shariputra starts to worry about how everybody's going to eat. Vimalakirti can read his thoughts and so he sends someone off to a land very, very far away, on the other side of the galaxy called Many Fragrances, to pick up some take-out for the bodhisattvas. So, a single bowl of fragrant rice is brought back from the Land of Many Fragrances, and, of course, that single bowl feeds the thousands of people assembled together without being diminished in the slightest.

Two small things that I loved about this passage is that, in passing, the bowl of fragrant rice is said to be made of mercy, and all who partake of it, everyone who is fed by it that day begins to exude a wonderful fragrance which is similar to the fragrance that the trees exude on the planet — Many Fragrances. At this point, this forest of fragrant trees decides that they will walk in a slow and stately manner back to the gardens on the outskirts of the city where the Buddha is staying with his community. And they arrive there together, and Ananda, who is the Buddha's attendant and has been staying there at the garden says, "Gosh, you smell really nice! What is that fragrance?" And he asks Vimalakirti about it and Vimalakirti describes it as follows. This is the image that I wanted to leave you with from the sutra. He says that in our lives and in our spiritual lives there are times when we partake of this bowl of fragrant

rice made of mercy. And that when we do that for a while, Ananda asks, “For how long does the fragrance last?” And Vimalakirti says, “For seven days. But what I mean by that, for a while.” We are fragrant with this meal. We have eaten but not yet digested, and in the time before we digest it, it acts on us to purify any poisons that are within us. Which is to say that any struggles we’re having, any difficulties we’re experiencing, any sorrows or rages or things that seem to get in our way and cause us to cause harm to others, they are purified by this fragrant rice made of mercy.

And in that time, during those seven days or five lifetimes that it takes for us to do that work, we are fragrant with that work. I loved that a state of purifying — that within us which is troubling, that within us which causes us pain and causes others pain — is a holy time. It’s a time in which we’re fragrant, when we’re doing that good work. Then after that time, however long that takes, when we are fragrant with the holy work of purifying ourselves, which I would like to contrast with a very common idea in zen that Americans seem to particularly like, which is the ‘stink of zen.’ The stink of zen’ means whenever you’re doing anything that’s ostentatiously zen, you know, sort of proudly, ornamentedly zen, that’s when you have the stink of zen. And, I’d like to replace that, or at least add to it the idea of the fragrance of zen, that when we are doing this good work, when we are allowing our troubles and our struggles to surface so we can release them, we are fragrant with zen. That is the fragrance of zen.

Anyway, after seven days or five kalpas or however long it takes us to do that work, then we digest the food and we no longer are fragrant with it. And that moves us to whatever the next thing is. That is the nourishment, the fuel for our taking whatever the next step in our journey is. And, I hear that fragrance going away, that point as being because whatever this step we take is, whatever this next thing we have come to, has become ordinary. It doesn’t even have a fragrance. It’s just our ordinary lives now. We’ve completely digested it. We’ve completely made it our own. And then that cycle gets repeated over and over again, and then we eat again, and then we purify again, and then we move to the next thing, and that provides the fuel to go on to the next thing, and on and on it goes in a kind of endless cycle. And that is one of the closing images of the sutra, a kind of benediction on whatever you have eaten of this sutra, whatever you have taken into yourself, whatever you are in the process of digesting —

that is your fragrance. And may you go on to the next thing, and the next thing, and the next thing, and may it continue to provide the nourishment you need.

And just to remind us of why we do that, I wanted to bring in a koan from a few hundred years later, which is about Layman Pang, who was called 'the Vimalakirti of China.' Layman Pang is the guy who falls down on the ground, and his daughter Lingzhao throws herself down next to him and says, "I saw you fall so I'm helping." So, that's Layman Pang. On another occasion he's visiting a Chan teacher named Daiyu, who's his Dharma brother, which means they both had the same teacher, who was Great Master Ma. And they sit down to a lunch together and Layman Pang starts to serve himself from the common bowls, and Daiyu says, "Don't you know that in *The Vimalakirti Sutra* it says a bodhisattva should never eat anything that's not given?" So, in other words, you shouldn't be serving yourself, you should only accept food when it is offered to you. And, Layman Pang responds, "When I eat, all beings are nourished." So, that's the next thing to remember. We do this eating so that all beings can be nourished. And the koans are full of beautiful evocations of that. They liken us to horses and cows, where it says the horses eat and the cows are full. *Clouds gather on North Mountain, rain falls on South Mountain*. So, all those ways in which whatever we're doing, we're doing within this vast system of interpermeation, and to remember that that's why we're doing it.

So, that's the image I wanted to leave you with, and I do want to have time for questions, comments, anything you want to say about what you take, what you have eaten of *The Vimalakirti Sutra*.

Q1 : That thing that stuck with me so completely, Joan, is when you talked about the choice you made when you were very sick, and you could've chosen to be the sick girl for the rest of your life, but instead you chose to come from the core of the bodhisattva.

JIS : What did that mean for you?

Q1 : Just, I get so caught up in my own things. I become that and then lose sight of the whole bodhisattva way, bodhicitta. Am I living for other beings, or is it just me and

my headache, or even my sister's suffering. I become that and then it's everything. So that just broadened that whole picture.

JIS : Thank you.

Q2 : It actually came to me early on in *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, where he said that if you benefit one being, you benefit all beings. That's been really potent for me in both that sense and the other sense. Actually, I had a dream a few months ago. Somehow, the whole world was quite small, and my footprint covered it, and that feeling of, *Wow, what kind of footprint am I leaving?*

JIS : Someone told me today that Frank Zappa had a song that was something about we're always the others, you know, whenever we're speaking we're always the others, the ones who aren't doing whatever it is we're complaining about.

Q2 : The thing that had the biggest, that I spent the most time with, is the petals falling and sticking to the private buddhas, because I love the humor, and I thought so much about different ways of looking at it. One being the control issue of trying to make everything leave. After working with that, I just love how I keep imagining those petals falling, and when we obsess they stick. I just really like that.

JIS : Good. And how crazy it can get when we're having a problem with flowers! Like, what's up with that?

Q3 : And everything could be a flower.

JIS : Exactly. Any lingering questions?

Q4 : I have a question about the bowl of mercy. Because the word mercy, you know, if I think of someone having mercy on me... Is it mercy for oneself? Where does a bowl of mercy come from?

JIS : Is there any difference?

Q4 : No, I guess not. Yeah.

JIS : There's a beautiful story that those of you who have been keeping company together with me for a while know, which is when before the Buddha became the Buddha, when he was still Siddhartha, and practicing harsh austerities, he almost starved himself to death. And, at that time, when he was in the forest and almost dying of malnutrition, there was a woman named Sujata in a nearby village who had a dream. And in the dream she's told to take the milk from a thousand cows and feed

that to five hundred cows, and milk them, and feed that to 250 and so on down til she has this very rich milk at the end. And then mix it with rice and go into the forest. And she pays attention to the dream. She follows the dream and does this. She walks out into the forest, having no idea what she's going to find, and what she finds is Siddhartha passed out under a tree, almost dead. When he wakes up, she's there with this bowl of milk-rice that she gives him. And she says to him, "May it give you as much joy to eat as it gave me to make." And, to me, that always seemed like the complete formula for a compassionate life, for a merciful life : May it give you as much joy to eat as it gave me to make. And, in that, nobody's left out. You're not left out, the person you're doing for isn't left out, it's all present, and all there, and complete.

Q5 : What's the difference between mercy and compassion?

JIS : That's a really good question. I think in mercy there's a quality of forgiveness and acceptance, no matter what. And compassion can be fierce. Compassion can be a big *No* sometimes. And so I think that mercy is the face of compassion, that is just completely forgiving and accepting no matter what. And it's not the only face of compassion, but one most of us could use a fair bit of.

Q6 : Is it fair to say that the bowl of mercy is kind of ... because I'm all into this and everything, and part of me thinks, like, is it really that easy? Like, this being kind of overcome with how easy it is, but then, at the same time, there's... you're taught to have responsibility, and responsibility to others, and it kind of is, you know, stops you from being in the event field? Is the bowl of mercy kind of a way to recognize the uneasiness of ease?

JIS : Yeah, and I think if we hold an awareness of how much we could use a bowl of mercy most minutes of most days, it might make it easier for us to imagine passing it around to others without a whole lot of opinion about it.

Q6 : Like, with my friends, it's hard to separate myself, like, the empathy, not be able to just put it out there and, like, just be part of the event field and, like, not take ownership of that. And they're on this journey and I'm on this journey, and we're all on a journey together, and we'll all catch up some time.

JIS : You said it was hard to do that? Where is it hard? What makes it hard?

Q6 : I guess because it seems so easy all of a sudden, but there's still, you know, climbing up the mountain and dragging the fish tail. That kind of thing. When they could peacefully walk up. And it's hard, in a way, because I'm a teacher. I want to be able to....

JIS : To help.

Q6 : Yeah.

JIS : So you're describing a circumstance in your own journey, in which your insight has gotten a little bit ahead of your compassion, and you can see things really clearly, and you're sort of feeling, like, *Come on already! You know? Can't you see it so clearly?* That's a place, and it can be a painful place, and I think you're describing some of the pain of that place, actually. So, have some patience. Your compassion will catch up to your insight, and then it will become clear how to be with and toward your friends. But insight moves at the speed of the mind, which is very fast. Compassion moves at the speed of the heart, which is slower. When they catch up and join together, then you've really got something. Does that make sense? So, you just gotta wait.

Anything else before we put Vimalakirti to bed? Finally, that poor sick bodhisattva can lie down on that couch, and everybody's going to go away, and he can just have a nice nap!

Q7 : Well, there's a lot of those images, you know, everybody being fed, and everybody finding a seat in a small room, and not only in this sutra but in other teachings, like in the Bible everybody being fed by a couple of fish, and to me it's just like this simple experience right now is enough. And what we're doing right now, that simple presence is enough, not only for us but for everyone around us or we're interacting with. We're just there with them.

JIS : So maybe we could say that that's the mercy of the present moment, you know, when it shows us that that's enough. And, that's available to us all the time. The mercy of the present moment is just right there, always, no matter what's happening.

Okay? Say goodnight.