

Vimalakirti, 3
Joan Sutherland
Cerro Gordo Temple ~ Santa Fe, NM
April 28, 2025

Good evening, bodhisattvas.

We are speaking these weeks about *The Sutra that Vimalakirti Spoke*, a Mahayana text about 1500 years old that was dearly beloved in China and in the koan tradition which is our own root tradition.

We've crawled our way to the moment when Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, goes to Vimalakirti who is in his home sick. And he's a householder, a deeply awake lay person, and the Buddha has asked his followers, asked for a volunteer to go pay respects to Vimalakirti and see how he's doing. Nobody wants to go because they've all had uncomfortable encounters with Vimalakirti in the past, and also there is this fundamental deeply disturbing fact of a deeply awake person who is sick. What's up with that? So, finally, Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, says, "Alright, I'll go." And then everybody decides they want to go with him. So into Vimalakirti's ten foot by ten foot room traipses about 38,000 beings of all kinds who are made perfectly comfortable.

And the dialog begins. Here we have this kind of archetypal confrontation between the embodiment of very clear, bright kind of wisdom, the kind of insight that Manjushri represents. And I want to make a little bit of a distinction between insight and wisdom, because he really is the bodhisattva of this clear insight, and wisdom needs something else, which is compassion to be whole. So insight meets sick, deeply awake person. And the first thing is Manjushri asks Vimalakirti a series of questions, which I don't think are random or just polite. I want to talk about them a little bit, because basically they seem to be coming out of a desire of Manjushri's to learn how to fix Vimalakirti's illness. And, of course, when we're talking about this, Vimalakirti is physically sick, but it means any kind of dis-ease that we feel, be it physical, emotional, mental, social, cultural — whatever feels tilted in this tilted world, whatever feels dis-eased, out of ease, is what we're talking about as illness.

Manjushri asks Vimalakirti first, "Can you bear it?" That's interesting, because there's an assumption in the question "Can you bear it?" that illness is something that must be borne,

right? That it is a cross to bear, an affliction to bear. And then he asks, “Is it possible that the treatment is making you worse?” I love that question because anybody who has taken up a spiritual path, and particularly if you take up a spiritual path with a kind of assumption that human life is an illness that must be cured, probably at least once or twenty times a day is going to come to the question “Is the treatment worse than the disease?” Right? *What am I doing here?*

So, then, Vimalakirti asks, “What if the illness is cause?” What happened that you got this? And in a moment you’ll hear that in Vimalakirti’s answer he doesn’t say *Oh, I caught the bug that’s going around*. Nor does he say *Because of long-standing karmic conditions having to do with, you know, actions in previous lives I’m paying for it now*. He says something completely different, so that’s interesting. We’ll get to that in just a second.

Manjushri asks, “How long has it been affecting you?” That’s interesting. It’s not just a bug you got last week; what is the nature of this ‘How long have you been bearing this disease?’ And then, finally, his last question is, “How can it be extinguished?” Not, how can it be healed, but how can it be extinguished? How can we *click* just get rid of it? How can we make it go away? So there’s no sense in the question of what is the process of healing? What can happen that might bring a dis-ease back into some kind of ease? So, to all of these very ordinary inquiries to someone who’s sick, Vimalakirti responds like this, with famous words : “Since all living beings are ill, I am ill.” In another translation :

I am sick because the whole world is sick. If the illness of all living beings were healed, then my illness would be healed. Why? Bodhisattvas enter the world of birth and death (which is to say this world) for the sake of living beings.

You may or may not identify with the sort of mythological sense of a bodhisattva being, you know, feeling yourself as a bodhisattva who has chosen rebirth in this world of birth and death in order to help suffering people, suffering beings. You may or may not care if that grandiosity was in you, but, certainly, it’s very possible for all of us to look at what does it mean for a bodhisattva to be born? Bodhisattvas are self-born, bodhisattvas begin the process of giving birth to themselves, and it happens every time a person like us, like someone in this room, does a couple of things. They find arising in their hearts the intention to discover what they can do that might be helpful in the world. And then, that intention having arisen in their hearts, they make the commitment to put that intention at the center of their lives. That’s how

a bodhisattva is born. Not by becoming completely, instantly awake and skillful at everything, and doing nothing but bestowing wonderful things on other people all the time. Simply by having the attention and having the willingness, the sincerity, to put that intention at the center of your life. And, then, spending the rest of your life trying to figure out what that means — not getting it right, not being perfect, but just trying to figure out every day in every situation what does that mean to have that intention at the center of my life? This is how a bodhisattva is born, enters the world of birth and death for the sake of living beings. We begin the process of giving birth to a bodhisattva that way, and then that birth is midwived by our family, our loved ones, our co-workers, our sangha. They are the midwives of that birth.

So, then, Vimalakirti goes on: “Because there is birth and death, there is illness.” Because we live in a world in which there is birth and death, there is illness. And I will amplify a little bit what I think he is saying, because that’s all he says. We live in a world of change. We live in a world of impermanence. We live in a world of coming and going, and rising and falling, and birth and death. And because we live in that kind of world, we are experiencing these constant cycles that include in them arcs of growth and arcs of decay. That’s the nature of living in a world where things come and go, rise and fall, are born and die. They also grow and they also decay. So, that is natural to this world. Illness, decay, the cycles of unbecoming, are just as natural as the parts of the cycle of growth and becoming.

And then finally Vimalakirti finishes by saying, “If living beings were to gain release from illness then bodhisattvas would no longer be ill.” What I hear in all of this is a fundamental allegiance to life as it is in this world. I’m like this because the world is like this. If the world changed, if we were able to release illness I wouldn’t be ill anymore, but as long as we can’t, as long as we’re in the process, I’m in the process, too. I don’t separate myself out. I’m not looking for a kind of separate deal for myself. I’m in. And I have an allegiance to and a love of this life as it is, even its cycles of decay and illness, as well as its cycles of growth and becoming. So, as will be revealed in the dialog that follows, the question for Vimalakirti isn’t *Am I sick or not sick?* Right? That’s not the diagnosis he’s looking to make. He’s not looking to put himself somewhere on that axis — sick / not sick. He’s looking for how can we be free in whatever circumstances we find ourselves? Wherever we are along the spectrum of sick to not sick, we’re free, in exactly that place. How do we do that? Okay?

There's a really interesting little thing that goes by very quickly in the beginning of the sutra where it says that Vimalakirti is feigning illness. He's pretending to be ill. And I've been chewing over that for a while, and it just says it quite quickly, and it doesn't go into a lot of explanation about it. So, I want to provide some possibilities of ways to understand what it means that Vimalakirti's only pretending to be sick. The first thing that came to my mind was the thing that Huangbo, who was one of the great Chan teachers a few centuries later, said. He said, "Teaching Chan is like casting fake pearls before people pretending to be beggars." What I hear with that is that, one level of understanding of that, is that in a way we're all involved in a performance, until we're not, until we know that it's just been a performance. And that performance has nothing to do with our essential nature. And that's us pretending to be beggars, pretending to be ill, pretending to suffer, pretending to have problems. Now, I want to make really clear that doesn't say that there isn't suffering, or that things aren't difficult. It doesn't deny or minimize that at all, but it says there is a moment when it's possible to realize that whatever the conditions of our lives, we're not beggars. We're not sick. Even if we're physically ill, even if we're poor. That doesn't make us beggars. That doesn't make us sick people. That makes us beings experiencing the nature of this world that includes dis-ease, that includes difficulty. That's all.

So, Yunmen, another of the great Chan teachers, asks a question of us. He asks, "See how vast and wide the world is. Why do you get up and get dressed at the sound of the morning bell?" That's a great question! See how vast and wide the world is, how giant and mysterious the vastness is, emptiness is. Why, in the midst of that, do we get up every morning when the alarm goes off and put our clothes on and start another day? And, there's something in there about a deeper way of understanding pretending to be beggars, that we're trying to put a certain kind of distance between the natural condition of being alive in a world of birth and death, which has its cycles, that natural condition and our identification with some aspect of it. I'm the beggar. I'm the wounded person. I'm the sick person. Those aren't the same thing, and that's a really important distinction to make. Is the nature of being alive in this world to be a little tilted because the world is a little tilted? That's different than saying my identity is as a beggar, as a sick person, as a wounded person, as a problem to myself and others. And, I think, in my own experience, I have lived with a fairly serious chronic condition pretty much my whole adult life, and I can remember early on, in my twenties, I can remember really

having to decide whether I was going to become ‘the sick girl,’ which is how I thought of it, you know. Am I going to go through life as ‘the sick girl?’ And that would be an identification with my condition, right? That would be taking a fact of my life, which was illness, and putting it at the center, and everything else revolves around that totem pole at the center.

So, one of the things that beginning g to birth to yourself as a bodhisattva does is, if you put the intention to be helpful, and the intention to spend your life trying to discover what that means, day after day after day, it takes up the space that you might otherwise use to put something else there as an identification. There’s no room for the sick girl if the intention to become a bodhisattva is already taking up that space. That’s really helpful. That’s really useful, you know?

So, that’s the kind of deeper, stranger understanding of pretending to be sick. There’s the wanting to put a separation between the condition of being alive in a world like this and how we identify, what we identify as, right? Then, there’s the... *The vastness is so big, so great, why do I do this? Why do I put on my human skin every morning and go out and live a human life? Why do that?*

Well, we do that because we are this bit of the vastness manifesting in this way. I’m this person, you are that person. There are the birds outside and the plants just beginning to spread out in the courtyard. The vastness manifests as this, and as this, and as this, and as this, and that’s why. We’ve been talking a lot in the koan salon about this question of ‘why?’ The answer to the question ‘why do we put on our clothes when the alarm goes off’ is, *bam*, hit the alarm, put the clothes on, and start walking. That’s the why. Does that make some kind of sense? We do it because we are the vastness taking this form and we accept the offer. We accept the invitation. I will live this life in this world that I have been given, and I will be willing to think of myself as a bit of the vastness arisen in this shape, in this form, and I’ll go all the way with that. I won’t withhold. I won’t be stingy about that. I will live that out to the best of my ability.

There’s a koan that addresses this as well that we’ve mentioned before from the *Book of Serenity*. And it’s about another of the great Chan teachers Dongshan, who was sick, who was actually dying at the time. And a monk asked him, “You’re unwell. Is there someone after all who is not sick?” And, by that, the question means is there an aspect of you unaffected by illness? Is there some eternal buddha nature part of you that isn’t experiencing this sickness that you’re experiencing? And Dongshan said, “Yeah, there is.” So, the monk asks, “Does the

one who is not sick take care of you?" Now, I think that is a very natural kind of way we think about it. That if there is something we believe in, like buddha nature inside of us, or God, or the Goddess, or something that we identify as that which is not sick, do we find consolation in it, do we find comfort there? Are we being taken care of by that 'not sickness' of the universe? But Dongshan says the opposite. He says, "I'm actually taking care of *that* one. By being sick, I'm actually taking care of that one who is not sick." And, this to me is that sense of I have been given *this*. I have been given life in this shape. And this is the vastness interested in this life wanting to experience itself like this. And I'm taking care of that. I am doing that on behalf of the vastness by living my life as fully and completely and unstingily as I can. That's how I take care of the vastness.

And the monk asks, "What's it like when you take care of that one?" So, if you are doing that, what happens, what's that like? And Dongshan says, "Then I don't see that there is illness." How I understand that is, it's not a problem. I might be sick, but there's not a problem. So, again, there's a dis-identification between the conditions of our lives and the identity that we take on as a result of that. I'm sick but it's not a problem.

So, it is in this absolute allegiance to life as it is, which might include illness, that we most deeply serve the true nature of things. It is in our absolute allegiance to life as it is, all its parts, all its manifestations, that we most deeply serve the true nature of things. It's the way we most deeply requite our gratitude for being given the opportunity to do it. We requite that gratitude by doing it, doing it all the way, not holding back, not looking for a separate deal. But, when the alarm clock goes off in the morning, getting up, putting on our human skins, and living a life that day that, once again, asks the question which holds the question at the center : What might be helpful? What might be the deepest engagement with life that I can make? What would it be like not to turn away from anything, even the stuff that's hard? What might it be like to be willing to experience the whole spectrum of life, without choosing one part or another? What might it be like to have that absolute, utter, complete, unmitigated, uncompromised allegiance to life?

So, in two weeks, we'll take up the next part of the dialog which is Vimalakirti going on to say, "From what cause does this illness arise, you ask? The illness of bodhisattvas arises from great compassion." And then Manjushri asks him three questions : "What is this great

compassion? What is renunciation? What is joy?" And Vimalakirti gives his answers to these three questions, so that's where we'll go next time.

For tonight, any questions or comments that you have?

Q1 : I'm interested in that whole group of people that follow him? Maybe they were pretending that they were not ill by saying that. And then they changed their minds and then they went. So there's kind of a sort of like commitment on their part to see what this allegiance was about.

JIS : I might say myself that, more than pretending they weren't ill, they didn't want to get busted for being ill. They wanted to maintain the illusion that *No problem here*. Right? *I don't actually want to engage this question, I want someone else to figure it out*. There is a beautiful switch that happens there with those folks.

Q2 : Wouldn't that be a good reason for Vimalakirti to pretend to be ill?

JIS : Yes, indeed.

Q2 : To stage that encounter?

JIS : Yeah. Yeah. And, how I would read that would be, that's that complete allegiance to life. Right? *I'll do that. I'll take that on*. Yeah.

Q3 : Often chronically ill children will see themselves as not being sick and being very strong support systems for those around them who are going nuts. So, I'm thinking, okay, what does this mean to a child?

JIS : Yeah. Yeah.

Anything else?

Thank you.