

Vimalakirti, 5
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Good evening, bodhisattvas!

We're going to continue tonight with *The Sutra That Vimalakirti Spoke*. I wanted to pick up something from last time, say a little bit more, and let Vimalakirti speak about what he might have meant. I was going over the part of the sutra in which Manjushri asks Vimalakirti what great compassion is, and he replies that whatever you do that is good is completely shared with all beings. And one of the things I was suggesting was that there's an emphasis here on what we do — "whatever you do that is good" — over what we feel. Which of course isn't to say that feelings don't matter, but to say that our actions, what we do, how we are helpful, how we put that helpfulness at the center of things, is relatively more important than the feeling state of ours that goes along with it. And that seemed to be somewhat surprising, perhaps, because we probably tend to think of compassion as something that is so essentially about feeling in some way. So, I want to double-down tonight and go even a little bit further about how I see Vimalakirti here.

In this dialog with Manjushri, who is the embodiment of insight, you've got a real contrast. And we know that so much of the sutra is about the raising of apparent dualities and then the reconciliation of them into nonduality, and that Vimalakirti himself quite explicitly embodies the ability to hold and reconcile apparent dualities. Even his name : the story of Vimalakirti, in an incident that happens later in the sutra that maybe we'll get to before the end of the year, is taken up as a koan. So there is some koan commentary about it. And his name is translated by the writers who wrote about the koans as 'pure name.' And that was seen as itself a reconciliation of duality, in that 'pure' was thought to refer to the vastness, to emptiness, to what doesn't change, doesn't move, is already complete and perfect. And the 'name' refers to the particulars of the phenomenal world. This has a name, that has that name, and things are known by their names. So you've got the unity of 'pure' and the multiplicity of 'name' brought together in Vimalakirti.

If Manjushri represents this kind of very bright, clear, fast insight — that sort of flash of understanding — then Vimalakirti must represent some other pole, some other opposite of that. And he really does represent compassion and the human heart. So, that's where I'm going to double-down, because I'm going to say even though he's just said this isn't really so much about feelings as it is about actions, what he is proposing is a process for healing the human heart. Just tell me what you think in about 15 minutes about that.

So, you've got Manjushri as that kind of clear-eyed, bright insight that moves at the speed of electricity in the brain, moves at the speed of neurons firing [*snaps fingers a few times*]. It's fast. And you've got Vimalakirti representing that red, bloody muscle of the human heart, which moves at a very different pace, much slower. So, if Manjushri is kind of spiky, you know, if the graph is very spiky for him, the graph for Vimalakirti is more like sine waves — much slower, rounder waves. It can sometimes happen when we're really serious about our meditation practice and we begin to have certain kinds of experiences that that insight will do what it does, which is run out ahead because it's moving so much faster. And compassion, the heart, hasn't caught up with it yet, and that's actually a painful place, because it does have this kind of spiky feeling. You can see everything so clearly, but you don't at the moment have the ability to feel any kind of warmth or tenderness for it. And that's actually quite painful. So Manjushri and Vimalakirti have to come together in each of us. They have to find a way that they're moving in some kind of sync, even if it's at different speeds that there's some relationship in that they're working together.

And, although Manjushri is often referred to as the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, that's not exactly my understanding. I do think he's more the embodiment of insight, and that it needs compassion — you need insight and compassion together to have genuine wisdom. So, wisdom is that third thing that's made from the reconciliation of the apparent duality of insight and compassion.

So we can hear it clearly in one of Manjushri's questions at the beginning when he's inquiring about Vimalakirti's health, and his last question is, "How can your illness be extinguished?" You know, let's get rid of it! Just, stop it! And there's that quick, clear instant quality that sometimes we experience. Sometimes things just change, sometimes it was one thing one minute and it's something else the next minute, and it's never going to go back. That's a real thing. So, okay, but it's half, or it's one way something can happen. And

Vimalakirti is saying, “no extinguishing.” That’s not what I’m speaking about. I’m speaking about a process of healing the human heart that takes time and attention and care. And all of his answers to Manjushri’s questions come from that place, come from his articulation of that process of healing the heart. One of the ways we’ve often talked about it, that might or might not be helpful, is Manjushri represents enlightenment and Vimalakirti represents endarkenment, and both of those things are important. We want that bright clarity and we want the depth of feeling and of the heart that endarkenment brings to us.

So, if Vimalakirti is embodying endarkenment here then it makes perfect sense that he would be sick, because that’s what endarkenment does — it takes us into the common...I was going to say ‘human,’ but the common experience in the world of the sentient, is where it gets difficult. And, where it gets difficult is also where it also gets deep and wide, and connected, if we let it. It connects us to other people. We share that in common. If Manjushri’s sword is always dividing things up, discriminating and seeing them clearly, Vimalakirti’s endarkenment, his beating heart is connecting things, bringing things together.

As I mentioned, it might seem strange to think about saying, *Look, compassion is really about what we do more than it is about what we feel.* And saying that that is a process of healing the heart. But, here’s what I think he’s saying, here’s what I think he’s doing.

If we go back a little bit to something earlier he was talking about, he talked about the rising of *bodhicitta*, the rising of our desire to awaken in a growing way, to have more and more awakening in our lives, so that we can be helpful. And you have to have the second part of the sentence or it’s not really *bodhicitta*. So, Vimalakirti, I think, is talking about what we put at the center of the labyrinth. And he’s saying to put *bodhicitta* at the center of the labyrinth. Put that desire, longing, passion for intention to awaken in order to be helpful, put that at the center of the labyrinth and then start walking. It is a process. It’s going to be a walk, you’re going to hit dead ends and make mistakes, and all of that. And, one of the things you’ll find, Vimalakirti says — and we’ll be talking about this a little more in just a moment — is that it’s going to be a lot easier to make that journey around the labyrinth. There are some things you put down. If there’s some baggage, you jettison as you go. And he’s going to give us some very specific advice about what we might want to consider jettisoning on our way into the labyrinth.

So, last week one of the questions that came up was : Doesn't your intention matter? If you're helping someone and you're angry, doesn't that flavor the experience both for that person and for you? And, of course, it does. But, I don't think that anger and intention are the same thing. If our intention is always that bodhicitta at the center, to awaken in order to be helpful — if that's always the intention, anger becomes possibly a co-rider, possibly someone who's hitching a ride on the event, but not the driver of the car. And that's really important. So, of course intention is tremendously important. And what we're talking about is shifting our sense of what the intention is. The intention is bodhicitta, and sometimes anger comes along with that. Sometimes indifference comes along with that. Sometimes a deep empathy for someone or some situation comes along with that. And, that's all okay.

So, now Vimalakirti gives some advice to the bodhisattvas, which is to say, to you. And this bit, I thought, was really interesting to me on this question of not privileging feelings. He said something you have to look out for is, that when you're doing this, you're doing this practice of the bodhisattva, you

...might generate a sentimental view of great compassion, but this should be forsaken. Why? If you have a sentimental view of compassion, you generate weariness and aversion toward the world of birth and death...

toward this world. That's kind of intriguing. If you have a sentimental view of compassion, by which I take it to mean something like pity, if you're feeling is *Oh, poor you*, then it's a very short leap from 'poor you' to 'bad world.' You know : *bad, bad, bad world*. And, he's saying that you can't do that. You cannot do that. Remember back a little bit, eons ago when we were talking about an earlier part of the sutra, his profound allegiance to life — "I am sick because the whole world is sick." — *I'm in. I'm here. I have not separated myself out*. This is another expression of that absolute allegiance to life. You cannot feel pity if that means you're going to say *bad, bad, bad world*. You're not allowed to do that. You have to care, to put yourself out, to make effort, to be concerned, without making the world bad. Okay? So, that's what I think he's talking about when he says it doesn't matter so much how you feel. It matters what you do.

And, again, the reminder that the world, to which we have allegiance, has difficulty in it as well as great beauty, and we are remaining true to that. But if it is a world of impermanence, and impermanence is the cause of a lot of pain and suffering and difficulty, impermanence also

means something else, which is that we *can do something about things*, because things are always changing. They're not immutable. They are by their nature mutable, flexible, and changeable. Maybe over years, maybe over generations, maybe over geological ages, but, still by their nature, capable of change. If we accept that one of the consequences of impermanence is stuff hurts, we also have to accept that another consequence of impermanence is that we can change things. We can do things.

In a sense, he's saying, when he says whatever you can do that is good you immediately share, he's saying our job is to bring the grace of the possibility of change into the world. We're confronted with impermanence, we're confronted with difficulty, and our job is bring in the grace of that, which is that things can change. Not a bad job! Really? You know? If we take it up? Not a bad job.

Okay. So, then we get into some more advice, which has again to do with this process of healing the heart. And one of the things you'll notice about his five-part answer is that it's basically framed in the negative. It's telling you what you shouldn't do. Don't do this. And he doesn't tell you what you ought to do instead. And I don't think that's by accident. I don't think it's because it's a negative view, at all. This is what I've come to understand from the koan tradition, which takes Vimalakirti as one of its founding ancestors, although he didn't know it. It's that what we have to clear away, the space we have to clear in order to realize our bodhicitta, looks a lot the same across people.

There are some well-known human problems, and we each might have our own baroque variation on it, but fundamentally the list of things that get in the way is pretty well-known, and Vimalakirti's going to give one of these lists. But, once we have done that clearing away or begun that process of putting the baggage down as we walk through the labyrinth — because that's what this is, that's what we're talking about now — once we've begun to put the baggage down and walk a little more freely and a little more lightly through the labyrinth, then we have to discover what we do instead. What gets made possible by freeing up the space, by renouncing (we'll get to renunciation in a second), by renouncing these things that get in the way. And, this tradition will never tell you what that is. You *have* to find that for yourself. It'll tell you what to put down, but it won't tell you what to pick up instead. That's your exploration — what a glorious exploration! We get to figure out : What do I pick up instead? What do I do instead? So, no recipes, no helpful advice, because from the

perspective of this tradition, there couldn't be. What I see to pick up isn't what's going to be right for you to pick up. And that's true for all of us, because whatever each of us does that is good, whatever skills each of us has, whatever arts, whatever qualities of character that each of us has, that's what we do. And we have to find that for ourselves.

So, the first thing to put down. Manjushri asks Vimalakirti, "How should the bodhisattvas comfort bodhisattvas who are ill?" Vimalakirti says, "1. Remind them that the body is impermanent, but don't suggest that therefore you should have aversion for the body." Okay? Remind yourself, remind *yourself* that physical life, the mortal life, the body is impermanent. But that doesn't mean that therefore you should have aversion for it. Okay? So, then, the implied question is : What should we feel about the body? And one of the many ways that someone took a run at that question is a koan of Dongshan's, when he was asked, "Among the three bodies of the Buddha, what body doesn't (and this is really hard to translate) fall into categories?" What body doesn't sort of break into particulars? And Dongshan said, "I am always intimate with it." What is that intimacy? What does that mean to be not aversive to the body but intimate with the body in whatever condition or state it's in?

The second way that bodhisattvas should comfort bodhisattvas who are ill is, "Remind them that the body suffers, but don't suggest that therefore you should strive for nirvana." Kind of another way of saying the same thing. Remind them that, yes, the body suffers, but the consequence of that is not that we should be trying to get out, that we should be trying to transcend the body, that we should be trying to get over the body. The way to deal for suffering isn't to look for the exit.

The third way we should comfort bodhisattvas who are ill, "Remind them that the body is without self, but suggest that you should guide sentient beings, anyway." I take that to mean, even though here we are and I'm sick and you're sick and I'm trying to be helpful to you, and you don't have a self and I don't have a self, what's the bloody point, anyway, of doing it? We've got no giver, no given to, and no gift. Right? That's the implication of selflessness. But, don't not help! Help anyway. It's doesn't matter. Okay?

The fourth is, "Remind them that the body is serene in its emptiness; but, don't teach that it is ultimately extinguished." This one, as I understand it — and this is all that he says. There isn't a lot of explication — remind them that the body is serene in its emptiness but don't teach that it is ultimately extinguished. What that's doing is it's uncoupling the vast aspect of the

body that already exists. You already have the aspect of the body that is serene in its emptiness. You don't have to extinguish it. You don't have to transcend it. You already have that. And so, the job is not to say *Bad body, must transcend*, the job is to experience that already serene aspect of the body that's there even in pain, even in difficulty.

And then this one is great, this is more contrarian advice from Vimalakirti : "Explain that you should regret your former transgressions, but do not consign them to the past. Use your own illness to comfort the illness of others." So, what he's saying is do not let by-gones be by-gones, as far as your self is concerned. Don't do that sort of like get-over-it-I'm-good-now-and-let's-move-forward... 'closure,' I think is the horrible word. Don't consign your former transgressions to the past. Use your own wounds, use your own difficulties, use the mistakes you've made to comfort the illness of others. If you hold a living recognition of your own mortality, of your own mistakes, of the ways in which you've messed up and are capable of messing up, it so softens our attitude towards others and brings out our natural ability to understand and forgive.

Can you begin to see how maybe there's possibly a process here for healing the heart? What he's saying is, if you do all of these things which are good for other people, it's also going to heal your heart. It's also going to be a way for you to find peace already in yourself, allegiance to the world, and a way to even accept your own woundedness and your own idiosyncracies — that they can be helpful if you allow them to soften you, and to bring understanding and forgiveness.

So, the first question Manjushri asked is : What is compassion? And so far we've been looking at that. The next question Manjushri asks is : What is renunciation? In most Asian languages in which Buddhism grew, renunciation has a different feeling than it has in English. When we talk about renunciation in English, we emphasize the part about what you're giving up. You renounce something, you renounce some kind of material thing, or you renounce an activity or habit or something like that, and there's usually a reason you do that. You think it'll make your life better, or you're demonstrating your sincerity, or you're doing some kind of penance, or you think it's immoral to go on doing what you're doing — all that kind of thing. The emphasis is on the putting down. In the Asian countries that gave birth to Buddhism, the emphasis in renunciation is more on what is made possible by clearing the space. So, it's on what can happen because you have put something down. So, this is exactly what we've been

talking about with the koan tradition. The koan tradition will tell you, make some suggestions to you about what you put down. And then the emphasis is on what gets made possible. What is made possible by that?

So, the question is : What is renunciation? And Vimalakirti answers, “The blessings generated are without expectation.” So, the blessings you generate by being compassionate come without expectation. That was formulated really clearly in the *Bhagavad Gita* :

You have a right to your actions but never to your actions’ fruits. Act for action’s sake, and do not be attached to inaction. Self-possessed, resolute, act without any thought of results, open to success or failure.

And the Daoists expressed a very similar idea in the *Daodejing*, saying : “Do your work, then step back, the only path to serenity.”

What I hear for us today in this is that we live in a world of seemingly overwhelming problems. If we need to solve them and soon, we’re going to end up in despair, because it’s not going to happen. It’s not going to happen soon, and it’s not going to happen all at once. That seems pretty clear. So, we’ll be in despair because we’ll have an expectation that can’t possibly be met. So here’s saying, what if you act, what if you put bodhicitta at the center, but you don’t even have the expectation that it’s going to take care of everything fast? You just do it because it’s the right thing to do? And, I think Vimalakirti’s suggesting that if you’re going to see what’s missing in the world, if you’re going to see what’s not possible, *I can’t possibly do enough. We can’t possibly do enough. We can’t do it quickly enough.* If you’re going to focus on what’s missing or not possible, you have to see what’s there, too. It’s only fair. You have to see that there are blessings. Vimalakirti uses the word ‘blessings.’ They’re not going to solve everything really quickly, but they’re real, and they’re there. And, if you only look at what isn’t getting done, if you only look at what’s missing or what we’re failing at, and not seeing the small blessings of what is getting done, of what we’re succeeding at, then you’re being partial in a way that’s harmful to your own heart.

So, here again is the way through Vimalakirti’s vision of compassion, we help heal our heart by accepting that there are blessings that occur. No one would, I think, argue that it’s a good movement to give up self-centered, in-denial, ruled-by-greed-hatred-ignorance ways of being in the world. And maybe as we do that, it’s even natural and necessary that we would throw ourselves so deeply into being pierced by the troubles of the world, that we despair for a while. That might be the necessary antidote to the previous problem. But Vimalakirti is

saying you can't stop there, you can't stay there, because it's partial. And because if we have bodhicitta at the center, our attention, our motivating force is to be helpful. And it's very difficult to be helpful from a position of despair. That being helpful, that's our intention, and how we feel if we feel despairing is destructive to that intention, actually, and destructive to our own hearts. So, he's saying, we should see what we can do as a blessing; not only for others, but for our own hearts as well. Let our compassion heal us as well as others.

I'd like to finish this section, finish Manjushri's questions.

So, the third question that Manjushri asks after compassion and renunciation is : What is joy? And Vimalakirti answers, "If there is benefit, you rejoice without regret." So, you get the theme. This is what he's saying, so, although we are unattached to the outcome, if there is benefit and rejoice without regret. So he's saying, in the same way that we can't be partial about embracing the difficulties of impermanence and not the possibilities of impermanence, he's saying you can't be partial about the exchange going on. You make the intention to be helpful. You act helpfully without expectation, so you share whatever you do that's good with the world. The difficulties of the world come in, they flow in, you act, you give whatever you have that's good. That's what flows out. And, if it works, if there's some benefit, there's some small moment of goodness that comes out of that, you let *that* flow in. You have to let the exchange continue. You have to rejoice without regret, which means to rejoice completely in what has happened without accounting and remembering all the things that haven't happened. You can't block that. You can't keep that out. Regret is about what's been missed, what hasn't been done, what isn't there, what's absent, how much else there is to do, but he's saying feel a joy that is not in any way attached by *it's not enough*. If we can do this, then we fulfill something else that Vimalakirti said earlier. He said if living beings are released from illness, I am no longer ill. This is a little instance of that. *If there is benefit, if there is blessing, if for just a moment in a very little tiny, local corner of the world there is something good that happens, in that moment living beings are released from illness, and I will be released as well. I join them there, too. If I join them in sorrow and suffering, I join them in release and in healing.*

Okay. I'll stop there. Any comments or questions?

Q1 : So we're constantly being released because there's constantly somewhere joy in the world.

JIS : Yeah. That's that sense of, if we really are connected, if we really are interpermeating, that's affecting us, too. Yeah.

Q2 : I'm noticing how much of this is couched in a somatic experience.

JIS : Yeah. What do you think about that?

Q2 : Here we are. We have bodies, we have aspirations and intentions, but that's ... engaging with that completely. And it's interesting, too, that aversion, it sounds very much like Vimalakirti is birthing the Mahayana.

JIS : Mmm hmmm.

Q2 : Because he wants us to be right here, in this, without the aversion, without wanting to get rid of it all.

JIS : I think this sutra was written about 2000 years ago, and it was exactly at that turn into the Mahayana. Yeah.

Anything else? Thank you.