

Vimalakirti, 7
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Good evening, bodhisattvas!

We are in the eon of *The Sutra That Vimalakirti Spoke*, and we'll continue with that tonight. Last time, two weeks ago when we met, we covered a lot of territory. Afterwards, a couple of people said there was one part of what we talked about that they'd like to explore more deeply. So tonight we're going to pick up a piece from last time and keep going with it.

That piece is when the goddess, who lives in Vimalakirti's ten by ten foot magical room is having a dialog with Shariputra, one of the Buddha's main disciples. She asks him a question about how long he's been liberated and he won't answer. So, she asks him why he won't answer, and he says, "Liberation can't be spoken of in words, so I don't know what I can say to you." She replies, "Words and writing are manifestations of liberation. All things that exist are manifestations of liberation." Shariputra asks, "Doesn't liberation mean attachment from desire, anger, and folly?" And then the goddess shocks more than she already has by asserting, "It is only for self-obsessed people that the Buddha says that detachment from desire, anger, and folly is liberation. For those who are not self-obsessed, the Buddha says that the very essence of desire, anger, and folly is liberation." A somewhat different take than what we often hear, and this was the place that a lot of people asked to keep going.

I want to start in the deepest place in this dialog, the sentence that underpins everything else, and that is when the goddess says, "All things that exist are manifestations of liberation." Sometimes it can feel like in a spiritual practice what we're doing is sorting things into the manifestation of liberation or related to liberation, or tending toward liberation, or will help us on the way to liberation pile, and the non-liberation pile. We're making that discrimination all the time. And, as we've talked about so many times, the fundamental message of this sutra is about nonduality. So, we can't have two piles. There's only one pile, and that pile is, as the goddess says, "Everything is a manifestation of liberation."

What's that about? How can there only be one pile? Aren't there things that seem to get us closer to it and things that seem to get us further away? Well, I think about something that one of our first ancestors Great Master Horse, Great Master Ma, said, that "For countless eons no being has ever fallen out of the deep meditation of the universe." So, there's a couple of gorgeous things in that. One is the image of everything that we experience, from the birds just outside the walls here to the galaxies whirling in space and everything beyond that, is the *samadhi*, the deep meditation, of the universe. That's what is. That's the first gorgeous thing. And the second gorgeous thing is : no one and nothing has ever fallen out of that. There is not outside of that. There is no dropping from that. We are held and everything is held by that.

One of the questions that comes up over and over and over again in the koans is : how can I requite the compassion that's been shown to me? Requite is a great Latin word that has a sense of 'repay' but also a sense of 'what can I offer in exchange?' When the question isn't *How can I requite this compassion?* it's *How can I requite the compassion of this deep meditation of the universe out of which I will never fall?* And one of the ways we can answer that question, one of the ways we can requite that compassion, the extraordinary generosity we have been shown by the fact of being alive, is we won't push anything out of our samadhi of liberation, out of our dream of liberation. We will push nothing into the not-related-to-liberation pile. We will hold it all in our deep meditation on liberation, toward liberation, our hope for liberation, our dream of liberation.

What happens though? Why does it feel sometimes like there are two piles, even if we want to hold everything in the one? Well, this comes up again and again and again in *The Vimalakirti Sutra*, and, in fact, it's the very first story that we are told, when in the garden outside the town where Vimalakirti is in his home, sick, and the Buddha is teaching in the garden, and he's saying that this world is a Pure Land, a kind of paradise. And Shariputra, again, says, *Well, hold on. I gotta say this world does not feel like a pure land to me. This world feels really tough, really painful, really challenging, and I don't see it as a Pure Land. I see it as a place of suffering.* And in their conversation the Buddha shows Shariputra that the world is already the Pure Land. The problem is in his perception. He can't see it, and the Buddha makes something happen so that he can see it, and he says, "The world hasn't changed. Your perception has changed." And that thing comes up and up and up again in the sutra, so that when the goddess rains the flowers down upon the bodhisattvas and the private buddhas, who are the

people who are meditating for their own good, who have a very separate and individual sense of what enlightenment is, and they're on that path; we might call them self-obsessed (we'll come back to that in a second) — but when she rains the flowers down on the bodhisattvas and the private buddhas, and the flowers stick to the private buddhas and they're busy trying to knock them off, to knock them to the ground, and she says the same thing. They say, "We can't wear flowers because we're monks, we're ascetics, and we can't adorn ourselves." And she says, "This discrimination doesn't exist in the flowers. This exists in your mind." And they say, "The flowers are not in accord with the Dharma." And she says au contraire, "This discrimination you're making about the flowers is what is not in accord with the Dharma." So, again, this theme : it's in how we see it. We make the piles of liberation and nonliberation — that has nothing to do with the way things actually are.

What do we do with our tendency to make piles like that? We've been speaking about something similar in another group. We were looking at an image from a koan which says, "Under a shadowless tree, the boat where people gather." Another beautiful image of the way we are all on this boat together, and we are crossing over to the other shore, the community ferryboat. And we talked about the idea of whether you can be *off* the boat. Sometimes it can feel like you're really *on* the boat. *I get it. I'm on the boat with everybody else.* And sometimes it can feel like you're not on the boat at all. So, what we talked about, again, there is no *off* the boat. Everything that happens, every state you're in, everything you encounter — whether it's a good day or a bad day or an indifferent day, or whatever's going on — all of that is on the boat. What changes is our ability to know that, our ability to experience that. Again, our perception. It's a big change to go from trying to figure out *When I'm off the boat, how did I get on the boat?* Having that as the question to *When I don't feel the planks of the deck under my feet, when I don't know that I am on the boat, what can I do to feel what's true?* That's a different question. *What can I do so that I can experience what's already true?* Not *What can I do to make this thing happen where I can get onto the boat?* And all of that is the, as I was saying, the deep underpinning of this question about detachment from our own sillinesses and pains, and whether there are things that relate to liberation and things that don't.

From that kind of deep underpinning, let's do some nitty gritty stuff about this. The goddess says, "It's only for self-obsessed people that the Buddha says that we should be detached from our..." sillinesses, our greed, our aggression, our denial. And when we can

detach from them that's liberation. But if you're not self-obsessed, then those very things, their essence is liberation.

Let's assume that we're not going to make a pile of good / not-self-obsessed and bad / self-obsessed. We're going to take the advice of the sutra and we're not even going to make those piles. We're going to look at self-obsessed and not self-obsessed as territory we walk through at different points in our life. Maybe an evolutionary thing, maybe we tend from more self-obsession to less self-obsession over time. Maybe we find that there are places that we're really kind of not self-obsessed anymore, and then there are places where we are still deeply mired in self-obsession.

If we don't make good and bad about that, the first question is kind of a simple self-diagnosis : Am I self-obsessed or not? Not because then you can say, *Oh, good, I'm not*. Or, *Oh, bad, I am*, but for a very specific reason, which is that the treatment that's offered is different depending on whether you're self-obsessed or not self-obsessed. The treatment's different. That's important because that's what we want. We want the right medicine for what ails us.

How do you decide whether you're self-obsessed? Anybody have a question about that? [Laughing] Anybody find that murky? If you do, or even if you don't, an interesting question to ask is : What is the spiritual path I'm walking? What am I doing here? Where do I think I'm going? What am I hoping for? What's my dream? If you're dream is a better you, you're self-obsessed. And, I'm not making that bad, I'm just sayin'. If you're dream is *I'm doing this because I want to be happier, wiser, nicer, stronger, more courageous, you know, more skilled* — whatever it is, that's self-obsession.

If you have another motivation for doing this, like, for instance, the one that *The Vimalakirti Sutra* recommends, which is bodhicitta, same thing. The deep yearning and longing to be wiser, stronger, more courageous, more effective, kinder, all that stuff — but for the benefit of all beings — then you're entering the territory of not self-obsessed. If the goal is may I be more effective, more helpful for the benefit of all, that's a move away from self-obsession.

Quickly, then, a definition of self-obsession, or a comment about it : self-obsession can mean being full of greed, aggression, and denial, you know. You're just full of it, it's squirting out of you all over the place onto everybody else, and you think that's fine. It can also mean you're desperately unhappy about your greed, aggression, and denial, and always trying to fix

it, always trying to work with it, obsessed with it, always trying to make it better or stop it or heal it or something, but you're always in relationship with it. That's another form of self-obsession.

A third form of self-obsession is that you can spend a lot of your time trying to avoid those things in the world, trying to avoid greed, aggression, and denial in the world around us, because it's bad for us, because it's scary, because it's unpleasant, because it hurts — you know, all of those things. That's another form of self-obsession, and it's just that stuff you're obsessing about and trying to avoid you've projected out there, or it exists, it actually exists out there. But you have a sense of a self that needs protection from that.

The problem with that, from the perspective of *The Vimalakirti Sutra* is that it puts you in an aversive or a defensive relationship with the world. Remember when Vimalakirti was saying, "How does a bodhisattva deal with people who are suffering?" Well, you can't every time say *poor you*. Because if you say, *Oh, poor you* — if you have what he called a sentimental view of compassion — the connection that immediately gets made with *poor you* is *bad, bad world*. And you're not allowed to feel *bad, bad world*. You have to feel compassion without an aversive reaction to the world.

So, same thing here. The problem with this kind of obsession with our pains, with our suffering, is that it puts us in an aversive or defensive relationship both with ourselves and with the world. Does that make sense? Okay, *I've got this problem and it's really hurting, and I have to do something about it or I have to get rid of it or I have to stay away from it, or I have to deny that it exists*. Whatever it is — so, an aversive or defensive relationship with ourselves, and with the world.

The goddess had said, "The Buddha teaches detachment from these qualities of greed, aggression, denial" and all the other ones we might have. "The Buddha teaches detachment from them if you're self-obsessed." So, if your tendency, if you are in a place in the map where you're tending toward an obsession with those aspects of yourself that are causing you to suffer, then the treatment, if that's the diagnosis, the treatment is some detachment. That's a good thing, that's a helpful thing, that's a positive thing. Get some distance from that stuff; get some perspective on it. Be able to, as we say it, dis-identify from it, to realize that it's not essentially you. Put some space in there. That's a good thing.

And there is plenty, plenty, plenty of advice about how to do that in the Buddhist section of your local bookstore or on the internet at the book-procuring site of your choice. So, I'm not going to go into that, because there's lots of advice about how to do that, how to get that little bit of detachment from those things.

From the koan perspective, what I want to point out in our typical kind of ornery way, is that we have to be careful about confusing the method with the goal. Detachment is a *method*. And it's a provisional method. And it's a method that works as a treatment, as a medicine, and for a particular problem. And, from the perspective of the koan way, at a certain point, you're going to get detached from detachment. You're going to want to drop it. You're not going to need detachment anymore. We can, for complicated reasons, in the West (also in the East), set up detachment as the goal. We think that detachment is the whole point, and so we do all this stuff in order to be detached, and if we get detached we think now that's it. It's just a provisional, temporary, expendable method. Okay? And the point, really, of that detachment, is you can — as you get some distance from the stuff that causes you to suffer — you can begin to experience for yourself non-self-obsession. You have moments and then hours and then days and weeks and months and years that are not self-obsessed, and that's the gift of the detachment.

When you begin to connect with that, you can move on to phase two of the treatment. And phase two of the treatment is when she says, "For those who are not self-obsessed, (so, to the extent that we're not self-obsessed, in the places where we are not self-obsessed) the Buddha says that the very essence of desire, anger, and folly is liberation." So, that's phase two of the treatment — moving away from things so we can get some kind of objective relationship with them, some more realistic relationship with them. We come roaring back right towards them, because there's nothing in the pile of 'not related to liberation.'

Now we're going to deal with all that stuff that seems hard to include in the pile of liberation, but is essential that we include in the pile of liberation. And, we're going to do that, not from a position of obsession about the self and the problems of the self, but from another position. Let me give an example to talk about the difference between those two ways of approaching it. Let's talk about something known to most of us, which is the romance of childhood. And, by the romance of childhood, I mean the idea that most of what we are, so much of what's important about us, comes from what happened to us in our childhood. This is

so common a belief in the dominant culture, in North America, that we almost don't question it. The Buddha never said suffering comes from a bad childhood. It's nowhere. So, let's look at the romance of childhood. From a self-obsessed point of view, that means that what happened in childhood is your 'go to' story to explain things that are happening now. It's the kind of default story that you're telling, especially when things go wrong. From a not self-obsessed perspective, that story of childhood, first of all, gets a lot of space in it. You begin to really understand the fallibility of memory. You begin to understand that your story of childhood is a version, just a version, and that it changes over time. It changes with you. If it's not changing, that's more of a problem than if it is, but that's it's something that has changeability, has impermanence, has malleability in it, and it's kind of interesting. If there were things that I think anyone objectively would say were difficult in it, you even begin to wonder, you begin to lose the certainty about was that a good thing or a bad thing that *x* happened, that my father did *x*. *This* happened to us. Whatever it was, is that a good thing or a bad thing? You know, maybe it had some pretty interesting effects on you. Maybe it made you strong in certain ways, independent in certain ways, compassionate, who knows. And, I'm not doing the 'suffering is good for you because it makes you better or more noble.' I'm saying we don't know. We don't know. It's much more complicated than any kind of simple romance of what happened.

We begin to get interested in the complications of it, interested in what we *can't* know about it, what we can't land on or be certain about. That's not to deny anything. It's to become intimate with it in a different way, where we can hear it speak a different story, and we can begin to get interested in that story. And so the places that are hard, and the places where we're like the tree that's grown around the rock in some kind of odd, funny shape because of things that have happened, become less like these insurmountable, irredeemable wounds in our lives, and more like that weak ankle we have because you've sprained it a couple of times in your life, and you know that if you're walking on uneven ground and you hit it just right it's going to go out from under you. So, when we encounter things in our current lives that touch a place in us that is weak because it got sprained a couple of times in our childhood, it's like, *Oh, yeah, that's the sprained ankle of my heart*. This person says *x* and I feel, I have this whole big reaction to it because my sprained ankle just went out from under me, in my heart.

And that's alright, you know? That's okay. Sometimes it's what makes us strange and interesting to each other.

How is it then that those things — the sprained ankle parts of our hearts and the things that really hurt and cause suffering — how is it that they are manifestations of liberation, that they have the essence of liberation? Well, because it is in coming into relationship with them, it is in feeling the sorrow of them, the disappointment of them, the pain of them — feeling all of that — that our hearts get cracked open, and there is no awakening without the heart getting cracked open.

Awakening is not an activity of the mind. Awakening is an activity of the heart-mind, and if you leave the heart out, you've got the private buddha keeping herself safe from any kind of difficulty, any kind of defilement, even calling it a defilement. So, it's like the heavens, the heavenly realms where the devas live, where everything is perfect and nothing changes, and awakening is not possible because nothing changes. It's in this world where our ankle goes out from under us and our hearts get broken, and we feel sorrow and we weep tears, that are like solvent for whatever is stuck within us, that awakening can happen. The light comes through the cracks, the places where our heart breaks. In Japan there's a custom when a beautiful tea bowl breaks, not to throw it away, but to mend the cracks with gold. And I've always loved that, because that seems like an image to me of the light coming through the cracks, that's where the gold shines.

We have ideas in the koans like "blessing this poverty." How do you bless this poverty? And the answer in this poem is there's something that can happen in the dark that can't happen in the light, so you bless this poverty, if there's no oil for the lamp. By doing what you can only do in the dark, which is feel your way along the wall and know where you're going only by the feel of the wall. And there are phrases like "it is better to have nothing than to have something good." So, again, at times in our lives, when we're in this part of the territory, when we're looking for the medicine for this particular discomfort in us, it's good to have nothing, it's good to be in the dark, it's good to let everything come down to the black earth. And when it's time to lie down on the black earth, to lie down on the black earth. Sometimes that's our practice. And we *have* to do that. If we avoid doing that, there is no awakening. There might be enlightenment, but there's no awakening.

And maybe the last thing I want to say about that is, in our tradition, in the koan tradition, there is a lot of affection for surprise and the interruption of habit, and even shock. We are not going for a kind of steady-state anesthetization of the feeling life. We are going for a kind of robust engagement in the world, and a willingness to be surprised, to be interrupted, to have our habitual ways of seeing things and doing things pulled, the rug just pulled right out from under us. We really value that. And that's also part of this work of, how is it that what we might call our hindrances, the things where we suffer, how is it that they are of the essence of liberation? Because, *if we let them*, they have the power to interrupt, to surprise, to shock, to pull the rug out from under us. When it hurts so bad you can't even draw a breath, what if you sit right there in hurting-so-bad-you-can't-even-draw-a-breath, and see what's possible? Is there a gap that opens up in that place of no-breath, that you can fall right through into something else? Are you willing to be shaken up, are you willing to be surprised, are you willing to crack? Are you willing to shatter? All of that at certain points on the journey are essential, and that is how anything, in the words of the koans, what is the blown-hair sword? What is the sword so sharp that if you blew a hair against it, the hair would cut? Anything can be the blown-hair sword, including a moment of our grief, including an upwelling of our aggression, including the fog of our denial. Anything, if we let it, can be the blown-hair sword. Anything can shock us out of habit, out of not seeing, so that suddenly, that world that a second ago looked either very difficult or very ordinary is radiant as the Pure Land. Because we have allowed ourselves to be surprised by it. We have allowed ourselves to be surprised by our own pain into something else. So, include that. Requite the generosity of that samadhi of the universe, out of which we cannot fall, by excluding nothing from the dream of our liberation, by looking at everything as the blown-hair sword that could jump-shift us right into a completely different way of experiencing everything.

And, I think that's my amplification of that bit of the sutra, and what it seems to me the goddess might have been pointing towards when she said what she said.

I will stop there, and any questions or comments?

Q1 : When you said "enlightenment but not awakening"?

JIS : I think of awakening as a kind of process that unfolds over a lifetime. We're always awakening, from the first breath to the last breath, and probably after that. Enlightenment, I

think of as these kind of moments of punctuation, where we see the radiance of the world, we really know the radiance of the world. And they're tremendously important because we see an aspect of the world maybe previously not know to us — that's crucial. But it's not more important than everything else. And the other part of awakening is endarkening. What we've been talking about tonight is a kind of endarkening. You have to endarken as well as enlighten in order to awaken. Otherwise, it's partial. Does that make sense?

Q1 : Then it's attachment to the method?

JIS : Yeah. So, there are all kinds of simple ways you can think about it, but enlightenment tends to be associated with insight or wisdom. It's bright. It has a kind of sword-like quality. There's great clarity, that kind of sharp, clear thing. Endarkenment is wetter and messier and of the earth and of the hearth more, and that's where compassion grows. Compassion grows from our experience of the earthy nature of the earth, you know, the earthy nature of the world.

I'm just saying that you have to include both wisdom and compassion, both the mind and the heart, in order to have awakening. Otherwise, it's a partial thing.

Q2 : So, awakening is the heart-mind, and enlightenment is...

JIS : The mind part of that, yeah. We're talking in sort of like slogans, but yeah. Yeah.

Q3 : I'm a guest here and I don't know what's going on. But I'm more exposed to the Theravadin. I am coming from Thailand. And you're talking about detachment as a mechanism or a kind of medicine or something like that. And you look at it, you look at it in a grammatical manner, and attachment is the direct opposite of detachment. If the attachment becomes less, automatically there's a detachment. You don't have to literalize all of this to make a mantra. One has to detach, one has to detach. Am I attached to that? And just staying away from that, automatically, detachment happens. Like the boat is tied to the post. If you want the boat to float you untie the boat. So one need not think of detachment at all. Detachment becomes less, even in relationship. All meditators take positions, and if the detachment produces automatically there's detachment.

JIS : And then what I'm suggesting is, that's kind of step one, and then step two is to find oneself in a place where it doesn't matter where the cup is. It makes no difference whatsoever.

Q3 : You don't keep looking for it.

JIS : Oh, you don't keep pushing it away.

Q3 : Because of the need creates an attachment, even in relationships.

JIS : Uh huh. Thank heavens. That's what love is, no?

Anything else that must be said before we close?

Thank you.