

# The Teachings of Vimalakirti

## Introduction

*The Teaching of Vimalakirti* presents in 14 fairly short chapters the core teachings of Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Considered ‘the jewel of Mahayana Sutras,’ the teaching is addressed to very advanced arhats and bodhisattvas by Vimalakirti (“Undefined Reputation”), a supposedly ill, advanced lay bodhisattva. Especially influential in East Asian Buddhism, the teaching clarifies the meaning of nonduality and stresses the importance of the Bodhisattva ideal of “saving all beings,” as well as many other important themes in Mahayana Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> The teaching does this in an insightful and spiritually imaginative, if complex, manner that includes humor, satire, extravagant drama, magic, poetry, and lavish description, as well as straightforward doctrinal discussion. The style of presentation makes *The Teaching of Vimalakirti* one of the most fascinating, inspiring, and readable, if bizarre, Mahayana Sutras, in fact a Sutra that is so extraordinary that readers are urged to relax their logical, discursive, habitual way of thinking in order to fully absorb the teaching. Most importantly, the Sutra stresses the nondual teaching that all dichotomies like nirvana and samsara, sickness and health, sacred and secular, and men and women are ultimately empty and thus make no sense.<sup>3</sup> When this teaching is fully realized, one understands completely (as Dogen and Susuki Roshi continually point out) that everything is already whole – so ‘just try your best and show up.’

## Origin and Brief History

The Sutra was most likely written down for the first time in India between the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE (with ca. 100 CE most frequently mentioned), making it one of the earliest Mahayana Sutras to be written down. Presumably (but not assuredly), it was handed down orally from the time of the Buddha.<sup>4</sup> The first translation of the Sutra into Chinese occurred in 180 CE. At least six additional translations in Chinese remain in existence, attesting to the popularity of the Sutra in East Asian Buddhism, where it became a noted genre of literature, not just a religious document.<sup>5</sup> Kumārajīva’s translation in which it was divided into 14 chapters remains the most popular of these translations. The Sutra was later translated into Japanese (about the turn of the 6<sup>th</sup> century), Tibetan (from the original Sanskrit), and a variety of Central Asian languages. Recent translations in English (at least six) and other modern languages are now available. Except for fragments, the original Sanskrit text has not survived. Since no school ever formed around the Sutra and it was never used as an object of devotion, it has never enjoyed the overall popularity of some other Sutras like the Heart Sutra and Lotus Sutra, and it never enjoyed the popularity in India and Tibet that it had in East Asia.

## The Storyline

When teaching the Dharma to many hundreds of thousands of humans and nonhumans on the outskirts of the city of Vaisali in northeastern India, the Buddha is aware that Vimalakirti, a wealthy, local lay Bodhisattva, is ill and urges his most prominent disciples to visit him.<sup>6</sup> They all refuse to go, for he has chastised each of them for deficiencies in their understanding of the Dharma. Eventually Manjusri, the mythical Bodhisattva of Wisdom, goes and, initially, debates points of doctrine with Vimalakirti in his sickroom, which magically expands to accommodate the vast assembly (all 35,000 of them) that have come to watch. Manjusri then asks Vimalakirti why he is sick and is told that he is sick out of compassion, for all sentient beings are (spiritually) sick, a condition inherent in living in this Buddha Land. Vimalakirti then asks the Bodhisattvas present to tell the assemblage what their understanding of

nonduality is and they do so one after the other. At the end Manjusri says that while they have all spoken well, their explanations are dualistic, for nonduality cannot be expressed at all in words (though in saying this, his answer remains tainted as well). Vimalakirti is then asked for his explanation of nonduality and he remains completely silent. This is the famous thunderous silence of Vimalakirti and the highpoint of the Sutra. In the last four chapters the scene shifts back to Vaisali where the Buddha is teaching. When Manjusri and Vimalakirti and their vast assembly are magically transported back to join the Buddha, the park becomes larger to accommodate them. After several teachings by the Buddha, both Indra, the king of the gods, and Maitreya, the future Buddha, promise to protect and propagate the Sutra – and all rejoice in Vimalakirti’s teaching.<sup>7</sup>

## Seven Themes

A very large number of themes in Mahayana Buddhism are directly or indirectly referred to in Vimalakirti’s teachings. Seven are outlined here.<sup>8</sup>

**The Dehistoricization of Buddhism.** As recorded in the Pali Canon, the Buddha and his disciples lived in a historical context bounded by space and time. They walked through towns and cities, often unrecognized by passersby. By contrast, events in Mahayana Sutras take place in both historical and mythical realities, as in this Sutra. While Vimalakirti is depicted as an old man living an historical existence, Manjusri and the other Bodhisattvas are ever young mythical figures not limited by time and space.<sup>9</sup> Unlike monks and ordinary people who are real and live in historical reality, Bodhisattvas are not real and live in archetypal reality. Both the Buddha and the Dharma are set in an archetypal context, too. The Buddha is now a spiritual figure (his true dharmakaya form) who appears on earth in bodily form (his nirmanakaya form) to teach, while the Dharma has become a purely spiritual truth whose meaning is undefinable and has to be felt or enacted rather than understood intellectually.

In effect Buddhism was universalized, idealized, and dehistoricized.<sup>10</sup> In doing so the teachings became ‘a living, eternal, spiritual truth’ available to all beings through space and time. Unlike historical truths, the archetypal forces and forms of myth are experienced through felt understandings and undefinable meanings – and in this way touch us much more deeply than mundane historical truth can. Still, as human beings we need both, for we live in both realities. Consequently, the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa* weaves back and forth between these two realms – as when during a dharma talk in an historical setting in a garden in a near-by town the Buddha suddenly performs a miracle!

**Magic in Mahayana Sutras.** According to Buddhist tradition, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas as spiritually advanced beings are in possession of a vast array of magical powers. The display of these powers throughout the teachings gives the Sutra its distinctive illusory quality. For instance, before the Sutra begins, Vimalakirti, an ever youthful Bodhisattva, uses his magical powers to transform himself into an elderly layperson. In Chapter 1 the Buddha turns 500 parasols brought by 500 visiting youths into a single enormous canopy that covers the entire billion-world galaxy. In chapters 5 and 6 Vimalakirti expands his 10 by 10 foot room to accommodate Manjusri and his large assembly, as well as thirty-two hundred thousand visitors and their great thrones from a distant Buddha Land, all without crowding. In Chapter 7 a goddess living in the house showers the whole assembly with heavenly flowers – and later switches sex with Sariputra. And in Chapter 10 Vimalakirti creates a magically-formed Bodhisattva and sends him to a distant Buddha Land to bring back a vessel containing fragrant ambrosia that feeds the entire assembly. In short Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are able to transform themselves into different likenesses, to move themselves through space and time, and to transform anything into anything else.

What is the purpose of magic in Mahayana Sutras? What job does it have? One part of the answer is the nature of the inconceivable spiritual truth (the ‘Inconceivable Emancipation’) that lies as a goal in

Mahayana Buddhism. If it is inexpressible in words, how can Bodhisattvas like Vimalakirti teach the Dharma? The answer is that they demonstrate it through action, in this case by means of magic.<sup>11</sup> A second part of the answer is the Mahayana view that existence itself is a magic show – that what we think we see is an apparition like those created by magicians. It's not that what we think we see is not there in some sense. The problem is how we understand our experiences. This is why the magical acts in the Sutra are to be understood as demonstrations, if fanciful demonstrations, of the Dharma – of what existence is really like. Again, in short the magic in Mahayana Sutras is intended to be poetic and mythic for the same reasons that the historical reality of the Pali Canon was universalized, idealized, and dehistoricized in the Mahayana tradition.

**Buddha Lands.** The phantasmagorical imagery of Mahayana sutras is also evident in the presence of numerous, diverse Buddha Lands (Buddha fields, Pure Lands). In Buddhist cosmology, space, which is infinite, is occupied by world systems, a thousand of which make up a small universe.<sup>12</sup> A thousand of these make up a middling universe and a thousand of these make up a great universe that corresponds to a Buddha Land presided over (with some exceptions) by a particular Buddha who is responsible for the spiritual development of all beings in that realm. Buddha Lands are created by Bodhisattvas through the perfection of their own mind within the context of spiritual practice. There are pure Buddha Lands in which spiritual development is relatively easy and impure Buddha Lands in which spiritual development is difficult, of which our Saha universe of suffering is an example. Among the Buddha Lands mentioned in the Sutra are Sarvagandhasugandha (“Sweetly Fragrant with all Perfumes”), which is presided over by the Buddha Sugandhakuta,<sup>13</sup> and Abhirati, the Buddha Land of the Buddha Aksobhya, from which Vimalakirti himself comes from. He was voluntarily reincarnated as an old man in our Saha universe of suffering in order to purify all beings in that world system.

What does the presence of (presumably) imaginary Buddha Lands in Mahayana sutras have to do with our own spiritual development? A short answer is that if a Buddha Land (like the dharmakaya form of a Buddha) is intended to represent a pure mind, and we have the ability through spiritual practice to create the world we live in (think poetic imagery here), then we have the ability to develop a pure mind, too, by following the Bodhisattva Ideal.

**Vimalakirti's Use of Skillful Means.** Mahayana Buddhism places great importance on skillful means (*Upayakausalya*) because just one approach to “saving all beings” is ineffective, for people and their modes of suffering are quite diverse.<sup>14</sup> To be effective, then, a Bodhisattva has to approach people skillfully in diverse ways. Vimalakirti displays this quality as well as any other Bodhisattva in Buddhist literature. Although an ever young Bodhisattva, he takes on the appearance of an old, sick (but rich) layman who wears the white clothes of a layman and lives like other ordinary people in the town of Vaisali. He does all of this in order to spread the Dharma. He meets everyone on her or his own level in their environment, visiting schools, businesses, and even brothels to put into practice the nondual life (see below). He seems to be a responsible family man with a job and a house – in other words an ordinary if important lay person. Because he is “sick,” people come to visit him, giving him an opportunity to teach them the Dharma. By implication, the Sutra also makes the point that the dichotomy between monastics and lay people is a false one (which is why, it seems, Vimalakirti is portrayed as a layman), as is the dichotomy between male and female as a goddess living in Vimalakirti's house humorously teaches Shariputra in the goddess chapter.

**The Admonishment of Buddha's Disciples.** The practice of skillful means is not always carried out in a gentle manner; it can take the form of “tough love,” as exhibited by Vimalakirti's admonishment of many of the Buddha's disciples in chapters 3 and 4 for shortcomings in their understanding of the Dharma.<sup>15</sup> [Since the teachings in the Sutra are for very advanced Bodhisattvas and arhats (those ready

to leave the “raft”), the incorrect understandings may seem minor to those of us less far along the path.] One of Vimalakirti’s main concerns is to try to get people to let go of their various attachments through the use of skillful means – and this is really all that he does throughout the Sutra. Since people vary in what their attachments are, the conversation he has with each of the Bodhisattvas is somewhat different. Nonetheless, most seem to involve one or more of three of the four kinds of attachments emphasized in the Pali Canon. The three attachments are: **attachment to views** (Shariputra when meditating at the foot of a tree has become attached to a view about “proper” meditation; Purna has become attached to a view of how to teach the Dharma “properly,” ignoring whether his students are able to learn and understand the Dharma from that particular view), **attachment to ethics and external practices merely for their own sakes** (Mahakasyapa in only begging food from the poor has become attached to external practices), and **attachment to the belief in a fixed and separate self and phenomena in general (including words!)** (Maudgalyayana in teaching the Dharma to householders is attached to the idea that there is a real existent self who is teaching real existent people). The fourth attachment emphasized in the Pali Canon is **attachment to sensuous pleasure** (in Chapter 2 Vimalakirti encourages the people of Vaisali to give up their attachment to their physical bodies, which are the source of both sensuous pleasure and suffering). In reviewing Vimalakirti’s admonishment of each Bodhisattva try to identify which of the above attachments is at play. During the review remember that Vimalakirti’s purpose is not to humiliate the Buddha’s disciples, but to help them move further along the path in their spiritual development.

**Vimalakirti’s Thunderous Silence.** The Sutra reaches its climax with Vimalakirti’s wordless teaching of silence. In Chapter 9 Manjusri asks the Bodhisattvas in attendance what a non-dual teaching is (or, more formally, “How do Bodhisattvas enter the Dharma Door of Nonduality?”).<sup>16</sup> Each gives an answer seemingly more insightful than the last. Manjusri, the last to answer, says that they have all spoken well, but their replies themselves, being expressed in concepts, are in essence dualistic – as is his own reply, for it is expressed in concepts. When asked, Vimalakirti keeps his silence saying nothing at all. Of course, in understand why his silence is “thunderous” we must distinguish between different kinds of silence, for there is amused silence, angry silence, the silence of stupefaction (as displayed by Shariputra in his confrontation with the princess), and so on. But his silence cannot be like any of these kinds of silence, for they are opposite speech and, therefore, dualistic. Rather, his silence is the silence of enlightenment, which is the absence of a concept of silence and, for that matter, any other concept. He uses speech when appropriate and silence when appropriate, acting spontaneously according to circumstances. Vimalakirti’s silence is “thunderous” because it opens up the gate of nonduality (see below).<sup>17</sup>

**Vimalakirti’s Gate of Nonduality.** We start the sketch of this theme by distinguishing between the two Dharma gates of duality and nonduality.<sup>18</sup> As human beings we are creatures of duality, for we use dualistic concepts like good/bad, compassion/meanness, and large/small to think about and communicate our experiences and thoughts – and to understand and teach the Dharma. The concepts we use are dualistic because they are expressed in terms of pairs of opposites. Again, as human beings we have no alternative (or so it seems) but to use concepts in our daily life – and to approach and realize absolute, non-dual reality (“emptiness”) through the gate of a dualistic way of thinking. This does not mean, however, that in doing so we leave the world of duality behind, for in realizing emptiness the duality of duality/nonduality itself is transcended, for neither is understood to “exist” in itself. If it did, enlightenment (“waking up to who we really are”) would not be possible.

So how does a Bodhisattva enter the realm of nonduality by means of the dualistic? That is the question that Vimalakirti asks the assembly of Bodhisattvas in Chapter 9 – and 32 give a reply by showing how a duality can be transcended by means of the contradictions inherent in it. Here in brief are three examples: (Sriganta) “I and mine are two. If there is no presumption of a self there will be no

possessiveness. Thus the absence of presumption is the entrance into Nonduality”; (Vidyudeva) “Knowledge and ignorance are dualistic. The nature of ignorance and of knowledge are the same. For ignorance is undefined, incalculable and beyond the sphere of thought. The realization of this is the entrance into Nonduality”; (Srigarbha) “Duality is constituted by conceptual manifestations. Nonduality is objectless. Therefore, nongrasping and nonrejecting is the entrance into Nonduality.”

The teaching here (which is the core of the Sutra) is that pairs of opposites are created by the mind – and one enters the Dharma Gate of nonduality when one realizes this and, in consequence, sees that they are not ultimately valid, but only means to an end. In thoroughly understanding this, Vimalakirti exhibits his understanding through his “thunderous silence” and, to benefit all beings, his interactions with people around him. This means in essence that a truly awake one lives a life without preference – though somewhat paradoxically, a truly awake one can enjoy her preferences as long as they are then let go.<sup>19</sup>

## Practicing with the Vimalakirti Sutra

Although we cannot live the life of Vimalakirti, we can practice with the *Vimalakirti Sutra* in many different ways. Four are mentioned here. First, the silence of Vimalakirti can be approached as a koan. “What is the silence?” “Show me the silence of Vimalakirti (in a nondual way).” Vimalakirti’s nonduality appears as a koan in both the *Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record* and the *Book of Serenity*.<sup>20</sup> We can also work on freeing ourselves from those things that keep us from spiritual emancipation, a task that was very important in the Buddha’s teaching.<sup>21</sup> The fetters here are diverse and multiple forms of craving, hatred, and delusion (the classic three poisons). A third practice is to observe (both on the mat and off) the “stickiness” in our own life. For example, has Zen Buddhism (becoming familiar with its doctrines or in becoming a “priest,” for example) become an end in itself, rather than awakening to Vimalakirti’s nonduality? Finally, true to our tradition in Dogen’s Soto Zen, we can observe in open awareness (*shikantaza*) instances of the three poisons and “stickiness” arising and passing through our mind. We are free to transcend suffering, but also free to suffer; we can practice to be a Bodhisattva, but we can act in non-Bodhisattva ways, too; our practice is to return to where we are in the moment (which is all moments) – this is the practice of nonduality!

## Notes

1. The teaching is also known as the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa (Sutra), “The Reconciliation of Dichotomies,” and “The Sutra on the Inconceivable Liberation (or Emancipation) of Total Freedom.” The word “nirdeśa” means “instruction/advice.” For translations and studies of the teaching, see Lamotte and Boin-Webb (1976), Low (2000), Luk (1972), Mather (1968), McRae (2004), Thurman (1976), and Watson (1997).
2. Additional themes include the equal spiritual potential of Buddhist women and men (both lay and monastic), and the necessity of emancipation from the three poisons of craving, hatred, and ignorance that prevent us from becoming a bodhisattva or Buddha. Vimalakirti’s message is similar to that of Nāgārjuna in the *Mulamadhyamakakārikā*, but in contrast to the dry, logical presentation of Nāgārjuna Vimalakirti’s teaching is presented in an imaginative, lavish manner, as noted further in this introduction.
3. This is the teaching of Nāgārjuna’s Madhyamika School of Mahayana Buddhism. For alternative teachings within the Mahayana tradition, as in the Yogācāra School, see Williams (2009) and Garfield (2002).
4. Like other Mahayana Sutras just where and precisely when it was written and who the author was remains unknown.
5. Unlike in India, the Chinese generally dated their translations. The teachings were first called a Sutra in Chinese translations. Reasons given for the popularity of the Sutra in East Asia include the flexibility of its outlook, its criticism of both śrāvakas and the Abhidharma, its universality, and its ‘brash humor.’

6. The assemblage includes lay people, arhats, and Brahmans, as well as bodhisattvas, various kinds of devas, and other nonhuman beings. It was considered a social obligation to visit the sick – and, it turns out, Vimalakirti has adopted the guise of a sick person to bring people in so that he can teach the Dharma to them.
7. Among the topics mentioned are the various ways in which the Dharma is taught in different Buddha Lands (through silence and using perfume, for instance), the Four Great Reliances (criteria for the spiritual life), and the place where Vimalakirti comes from (Abhirati, the eastern Buddha Land of the Buddha Aksobhya) – and since everyone wants to see it, Vimalakirti uses magic to show it to them.
8. Other themes not emphasized here are the equality (in emptiness) of women and men (as demonstrated by Sariputra’s encounter with the goddess), the equality of lay people and monastics (again, in emptiness), and the nature of the family of the Buddha.
9. Manjusri and the other Bodhisattvas featured in the Sutra are not familiar figures in Pali scriptures.
10. It should be noted that the modern concept of history as we understand it was likely unknown at the time.
11. A few examples: the ever expanding space of Vimalakirti’s room demonstrates the absolute reality of space (i.e., that space is only a concept); in changing her sex and that of Sariputra the goddess is demonstrating that sex differences are part of the realm of phenomenal illusion; and the Sutra as a whole demonstrates ‘the greatest magic of all, the magic of self-emptiness.’
12. In Buddhist cosmology space, which is infinite, is occupied by infinite world systems. One small universe is made up of 1,000 world systems, a middling universe is made up of 1,000 small universes, and a great universe is made up of a thousand of these. A Buddha Land corresponds to a great universe, most of which have a Buddha responsible for the spiritual development of all living things on these world systems.
13. In this Buddha Land perfume is used as a metaphor for the ‘far reaching influences of an ultimate reality that ‘perfumes’ conditioned existence. Because it is also ‘perfumed’ by conventional reality and conditioned existence, ultimate reality manifests compassion’ (paraphrased from an unattributed Web site).
14. Traditionally, the practice of skillful means involves the four elements of conversion (Sangrahavastus), the four analytical knowledge’s (Pratisamvids), and the magical formulae (Dharanis, high levels of mindfulness and insight).
15. Many readers of the Sutra find it offensive because of Vimalakirti’s seemingly harsh treatment of the Bodhisattvas. In contrast they would shower them with love and kindness. Is that the path to emancipation?
16. It should be pointed out that a common trope in Mahayana Sutras is to “ask a fundamental question that is answered by the most fundamental answer, the empty answer.”
17. Although Buddhist literature contains many examples of the rhetoric of silence, this does not mean that the dualism of language and its concepts is to be abandoned. As emphasized in the next theme, the use of the dualism of language is a necessary Dharma Gate to Vimalakirti’s nonduality in our Saha world.
18. Most simply expressed, a Dharma Gate is anything that leads one to a deeper understanding of the Buddha’s teachings (Dharma1) and eventually the Ultimate Truth (Dharma 2) (“Dharma Gates are boundless, I vow to enter them”). In this sense the Dharma as teachings is a door to the Dharma as Ultimate Truth (Emptiness).
19. Phrased another way, things do not “stick to” a truly awakened one, as illustrated in the famous passage when a shower of flowers sent down by the goddess sticks to the robes of monks and nuns but fall off of Bodhisattvas and Vimalakirti, who is a Bodhisattva. Likewise, if Vimalakirti makes a lot of money, it does not “stick to” him. Historically, it seems that Nagarjuna leads to the teachings in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, which leads to the *Sandokai*, for which see Suzuki Roshi’s *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness*.
20. See case 84 in the *Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record* and case 48 in the *Book of Serenity* and *The Book of Equanimity*.
21. Three books that I have found particularly useful in this practice are Ken McLeod’s *Wake up To Your Life* (2001), Daniel Siegel’s *Mindsight* (2011), and Linda Graham’s *Bouncing Back* (2013).

## Further Reading and Other Resources

(Note: there are various editions of some of these references. The year of first publication is used here unless otherwise noted.)

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