





The Sūtra of  
The Teaching of Vimalakīrti

The Sūtra of  
The Teaching of Vimalakīrti

A Celebrity Falls Sick

by

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche

The Teaching of Vimalakīrti

English translation of the Sūtra by

Robert A.F. Thurman

Edited by

84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha





This work is provided under the protection of a Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution - Non-commercial - No-derivatives) 3.0 copyright. It may be copied or printed for fair use, but only with full attribution, and not for commercial advantage or personal compensation. For full details, see the Creative Commons license.

Published by



**84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha** is a global non-profit initiative that aims to translate all of the Buddha's words into modern languages, and to make them available to everyone.

# Contents

## A Celebrity Falls Sick

by Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche

|                           |    |
|---------------------------|----|
| Setting the Scene         | 2  |
| Where is the Buddhafield? | 6  |
| Vimalakīrti               | 8  |
| Śāriputra                 | 12 |
| Maudgalyāyana             | 17 |
| Kāśyapa                   | 21 |
| Subhūti                   | 23 |
| Rāhula                    | 26 |
| Ānanda                    | 29 |
| Maitreya                  | 32 |
| Jagatindhara              | 36 |
| Suddata                   | 42 |
| Mañjuśrī                  | 44 |
| Liberation and Bondage    | 53 |
| Śāriputra                 | 56 |
| Think the Unthinkable     | 61 |
| Mañjuśrī                  | 63 |
| The Goddess               | 67 |
| Mañjuśrī                  | 70 |
| What Makes a Buddha?      | 71 |
| What is Non-duality?      | 73 |
| Śāriputra                 | 75 |
| Ānanda                    | 79 |
| The Epilogue              | 83 |

# The Sūtra of the Teaching of Vimalakīrti

English translation by Robert A.F. Thurman

|    |   |     |
|----|---|-----|
| 1  | Purification of the Buddhafield   | 100 |
| 2  | Inconceivable Skill in Liberative Art                                   | 112 |
| 3  | The Disciples' and the Bodhisattvas' Reluctance<br>to Visit Vimalakīrti | 116 |
| 4  | The Consolation of the Invalid  | 135 |
| 5  | The Inconceivable Liberation  | 144 |
| 6  | The Goddess   | 150 |
| 7  | The Family of the Tathāgatas  | 158 |
| 8  | The Dharma-Door of Nonduality   | 167 |
| 9  | The Feast Brought by the Emanated Incarnation                           | 172 |
| 10 | Lesson of the Destructible and the Indestructible                       | 179 |
| 11 | Vision of the Universe Abhirati and the<br>Tathāgata Akṣobhya           | 187 |
| 12 | Antecedents and Transmission of the Holy Dharma                         | 193 |

# A Celebrity Falls Sick

# A Celebrity Falls Sick

by

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche

Some two thousand five hundred years ago, a man in northern India changed the course of spiritual history. Since then, his impact and influence have been so profound and far-reaching that even today, people are blessed with a natural sympathy and affinity not only for him, but for his groundbreaking ideas and unique wisdom legacy. We are still deeply moved by his life story and fascinated by what the people of his time considered to be important. Their conversations intrigue us and hearing about what they wanted to achieve inspires and motivates us. At the same time, to a modern mind, many stories sound utterly fantastic. How can people like us even attempt to enter into the spirit of that era? Or believe, let alone appreciate, a single word of the brilliantly profound sūtra contained within this book?

Our only hope is to use our imaginations, our minds. After all, what else is there? As this great Indian man himself said, there is nothing but mind. And if, by getting to know the fabulous stories recorded in this sūtra, we can, in the process, shower a few blessings on both ourselves and others – and perhaps even draw a little consolation from them – then why not? Why not let loose our imaginations and immerse ourselves in the ancient and phantasmagorical tales known as ‘The Sūtra of the Teaching of Vimalakīrti’<sup>1</sup> or, the ‘Vimalakīrti Sūtra’.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*

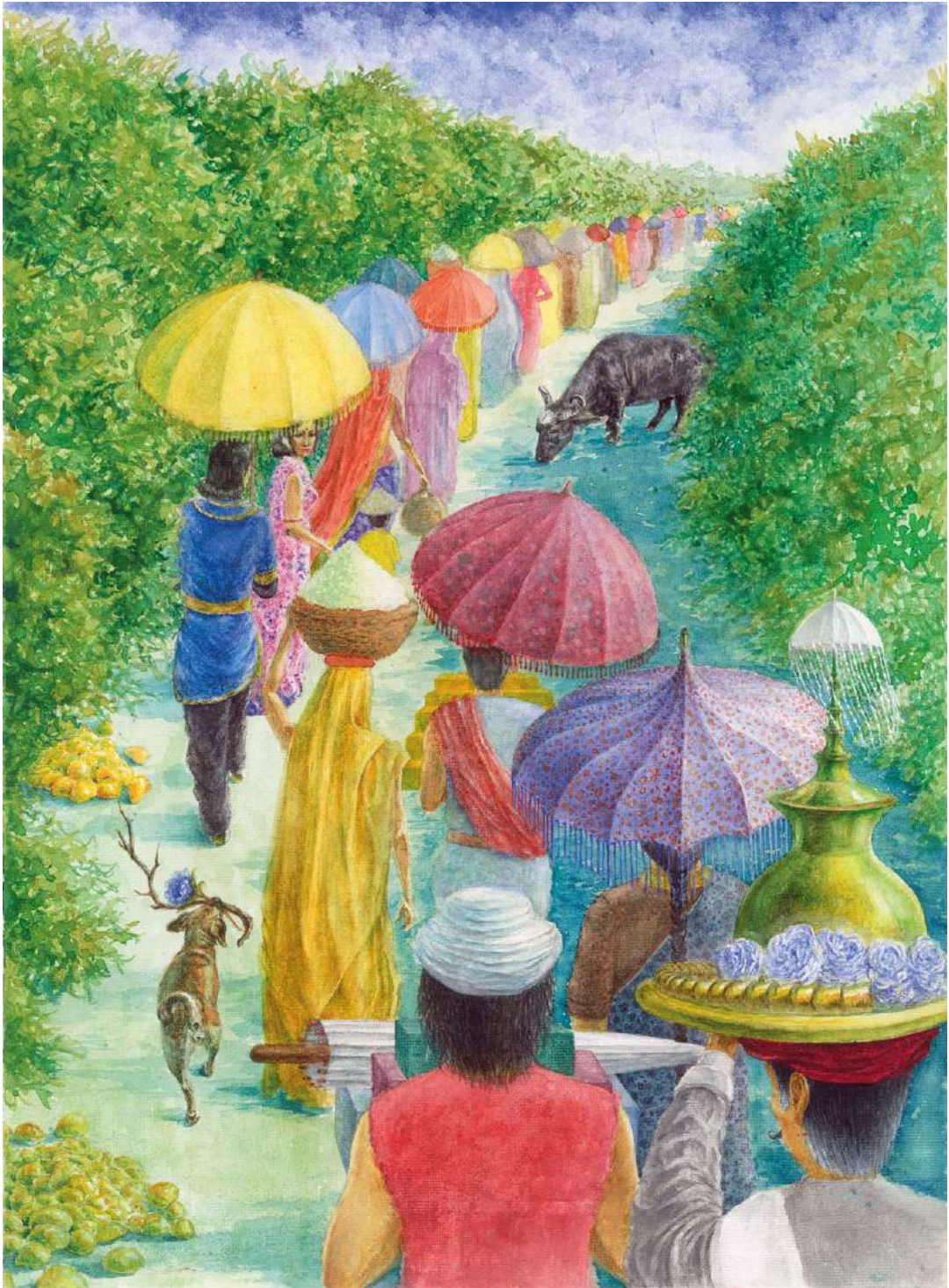
## Setting the Scene

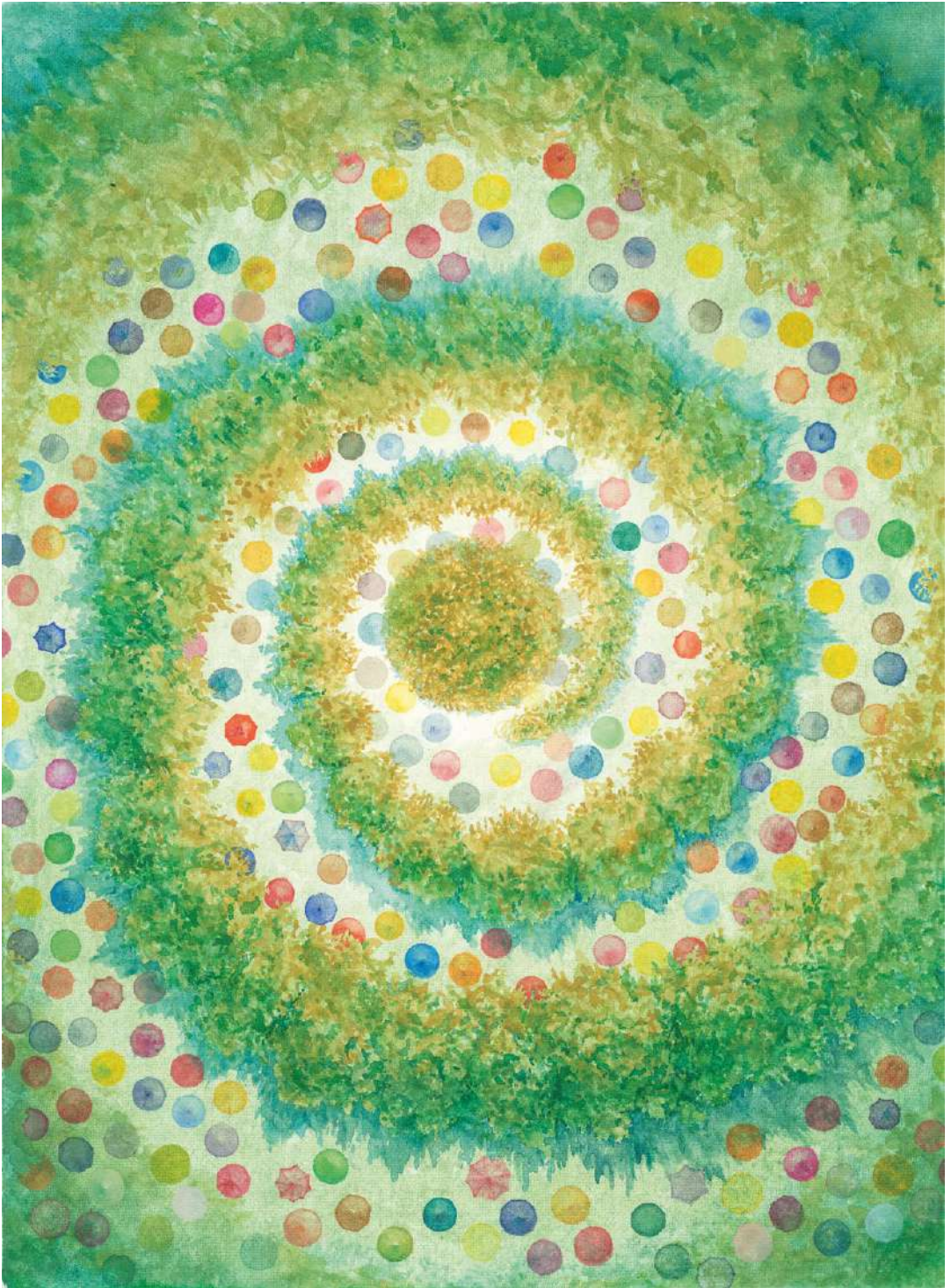
Many of the conversations recorded in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra take place in a mango grove. Mangos were, and are, a very popular fruit in India and groves of mango trees have been cultivated throughout the country for centuries. But it's not the fruit of the mango that is important to this story, it's what happened beneath the branches of one particular mango grove in north India. Whenever I think of it, I'm filled with a vivid sense of the enormous number of wisdom teachings that were given, discussed and debated beneath its boughs. I also remember that this great Indian man often used the mango as an example. He said that human beings develop in the same way mangos do. Some of us ripen on the outside but not on the inside; others ripen on the inside but not on the outside; others still ripen both inside and outside, or don't ripen at all.

What was it like in that mango grove, I wonder? Can you imagine it? The heavy, sweet scent of ripe mangos, each surrounded by a swarm of honey bees; all those irritating flies; the ubiquitous steaming cow pats; the black buffalo with shining coats and well-oiled horns; long prickly grass swaying in the hot, dry wind; and of course, the air thick with clouds of red and yellow dust. In the midst of all this sat a man – for the sake of clear communication, let's label him the 'Tathāgata' – and around him sat his many disciples, bodhisattvas, arhats, monks, kings of gods, kings of asuras, kings of men and their considerable entourages.

The Tathāgata's mango grove wasn't far from the ancient city of Vaiśālī, which today lies in Bihar, a mere twenty-hour train ride from Delhi. Present-day Bihar is one of India's poorest states. Its corrupt politicians are infamous for having betrayed the wishes of the Bihari people by perpetuating the caste system solely to retain their hold on power. By contrast, two thousand five hundred years ago, Vaiśālī – which, ironically, was the world's first great republic – was famous for being the capital city of the widely influential Licchavi clan, the birthplace of the founder of Jainism, and where the Tathāgata gave his last teaching before his parinirvāṇa.

The Vimalakīrti Sūtra opens with a grand procession made up of five hundred young Licchavis. They walked all the way from Vaiśālī to the mango grove with the sole intention of visiting and making offerings to the Tathāgata. Crowds always gathered around the Tathāgata wherever he





went, but this shining cavalcade of five hundred beautiful young men and women decked out in all their finery, each bearing an exquisite bejewelled parasol as a gift for the Tathāgata, was unique. What a glorious sight! I wish someone had had a camera; someone like the great Japanese film-maker Akira Kurosawa, perhaps. But even the mighty Kurosawa's unerring eye – like a tiny insect staring into the infinite sky – would have been unable to take in all that went on that day.

What happened next is a little hard for modern, sceptical, narrow-minded people like us to chew on. Our minds are as small as the wood louse that gnaws a hole in a piece of wood, then thinks, 'That must be the sky!' Even smaller, actually, and therefore virtually incapable of fathoming what came next. Is it just a tall story? Some might think so; or at best, that it's a miracle. But most people are likely to ignore the whole thing. Which is why I must now finely-tune our minds, so we can at least attempt to understand what went on that day.

Try to keep your heart and mind open as you picture the scene in your mind's eye. The Licchavis arrive at the mango grove and offer their five hundred parasols to the Tathāgata. He graciously accepts them all and blesses them. In an instant, all five hundred parasols become one, beneath which the Tathāgata places the *entire* universe – not just the few planets that we human beings have managed to name, like Jupiter and Mars, the entire universe. And everything fits! Which is precisely where our problems begin.

Our fixed, dualistic minds have become accustomed to the idea that even three people are too many to fit under a single umbrella on a rainy day. So how did the Tathāgata manage to fit the entire universe under one ornamental parasol? Was he exercising his miraculous powers? The ability to perform miracles is one of the many unique qualities of a sublime being, so isn't that the most likely explanation? Or was it nothing more than a magic trick?

Those of you with particularly critical and sceptical minds might be tempted to dismiss the whole incident as a fanciful Buddhist myth. But whatever you think right now, just bear this first story in mind. If you do, as the sūtra unfolds, you might begin to understand why it's so important and, even if you still can't accept it literally, at least you won't write it off completely.

Before we go on, I must tell you that the Tathāgata is also known as the Buddha. In fact Buddha, the Tathāgata, had many different names – Bull of a Man, Lion of the Shakyas and King of the Bipedes. He was also known as the King of the Foe-Destroyers (an 'arhat'). But in his case, foes

weren't people, they were his emotions and his habit of clinging to his ego. Throughout his previous one thousand lifetimes as a bodhisattva, the only things the Tathāgata ever destroyed were his emotions and his ego; he never once harmed a single being.

## Where is the Buddhafield?

After the Tathāgata blessed the parasol and placed the whole universe beneath it, the Licchavis praised him at great length, then asked a very important question.

“Where is the buddhafield?”

During Buddha's lifetime, this question was a bit like a contemporary Christian asking, “Where is heaven?”

Buddha's very long answer began with, “This is it! Precisely where you are sitting. This mundane saṃsāric place *is* a buddhafield.”

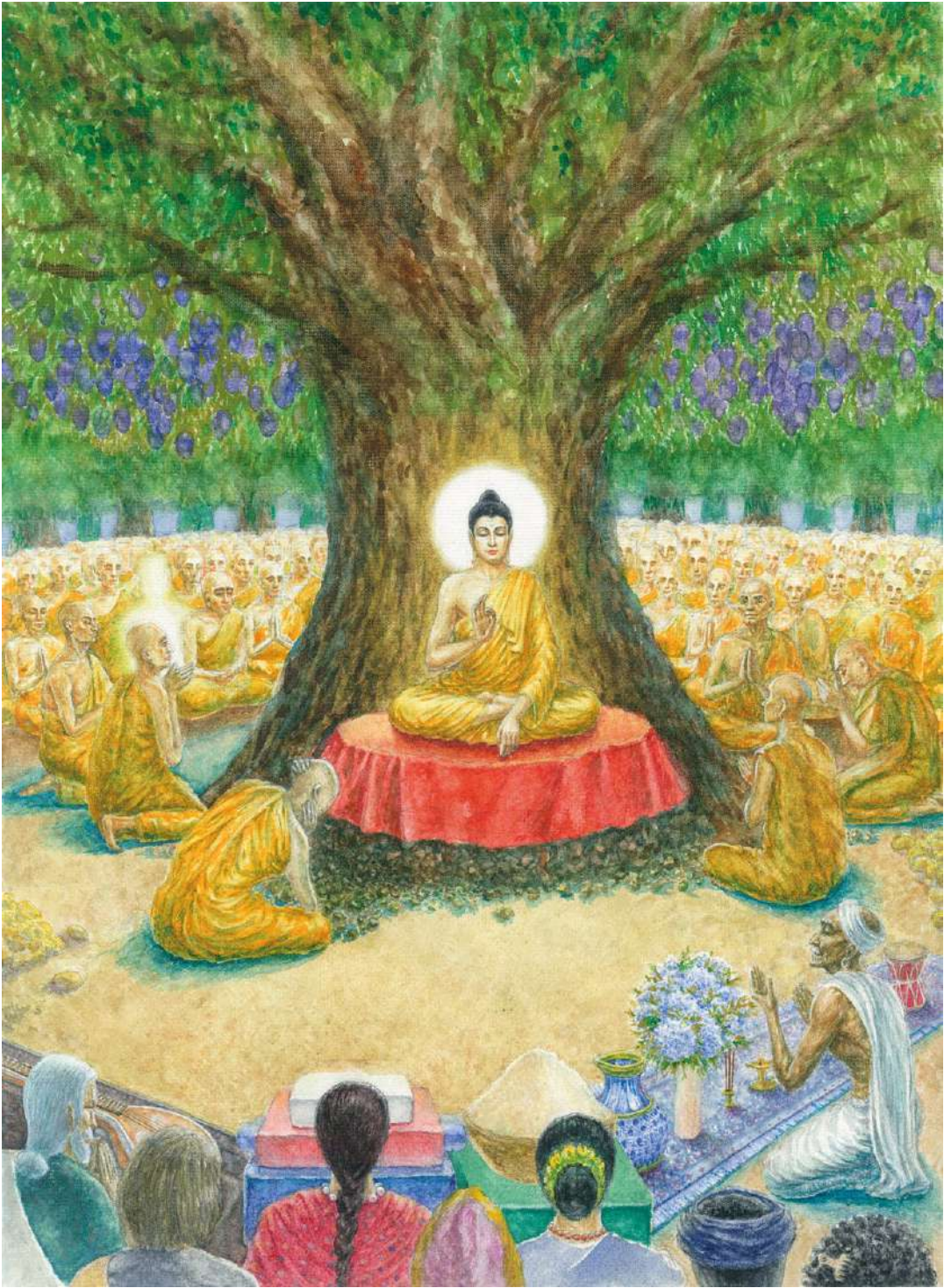
As he continued to speak, one of his closest disciples, Śāriputra, surveyed the dust, thorns and, of course, the cow pats that surrounded him and thought, “How can this place be a buddhafield?”

That sounds like a doubt, doesn't it? But in this context, Śāriputra's scepticism was a manifestation of the Buddha's blessings and is itself a crucial teaching – especially today, when so many doubt their spiritual teachers and gurus, the spiritual path, the teachings and their fellow spiritual seekers. Thanks to this story, though, we now know that it's possible for a doubt to arise as a result of the Buddha's blessings. But please remember, not all doubts are blessings.

Although none of the other bodhisattvas had any trouble accepting that dirty, barren Bihar was a buddhafield, Śāriputra just couldn't see it. Twenty-first century Bihar is the noisiest place on earth. It's also desperately overcrowded. Bollywood music blares from every window and car horns honk continuously day and night. As crooks and gangsters control the state it's also very dangerous; I'm told that ordinary Biharis are more afraid of the police than they are of dacoits and street gangs.

“How can this place with its bare rocks, dust, thorns, treacherous cliffs and searing heat be a buddhafield?” thought Śāriputra.

The Buddha, instantly aware of what was passing through Śāriputra's mind, quickly explained ‘how’, then blessed Śāriputra so that he too could



see the pristine, blissful buddhafield they were standing in, devoid of ‘cliff’, ‘abyss’ or ‘danger’. Let’s call it a ‘real’ buddhafield for now.

Buddha opened Śāriputra’s eyes in the same way a good art teacher can demonstrate the greatness and significance of an otherwise incomprehensible piece of modern art. By explaining how the artist reinterpreted the rules of composition and colour, the intent behind the work, the courage such a radical approach required and the prevailing social attitudes to art, a teacher can reveal why an artist like Picasso, for example, is so highly thought of in the art world. Once the students’ eyes have been opened to the brilliance and outrageousness of Picasso’s approach, they will begin to see that what initially looked like nothing more than a bicycle seat and a broken pair of handlebars is in fact a bona fide work of art. But of course, it goes without saying that Buddha accomplished much more than that when his blessings made it possible for Śāriputra to see filthy Bihar as a buddhafield. It also marks the beginning of the Vimalakīrti Sūtra’s exhaustive discussion about just how different each individual’s perception of the world really is.

## Vimalakīrti

You must be wondering why this text is called the ‘Vimalakīrti’ Sūtra. Most of us know that sūtras belong to India’s rich literary tradition. A sūtra can be a record of a teaching, or a manual, or simply a collection of aphorisms, like the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali, or even the Kāma Sūtra. So, where does this sūtra get its name?

One of Vaiśālī’s most successful and popular citizens at that time was a Licchavi called Vimalakīrti. He was a *layperson* – please bear this in mind. It’s important because back then, the most highly revered and valued members of Indian society were the *saṃnyāsins* – monks and renunciants – not laypeople; and especially not laypeople who kept the sort of unconventional and extremely colourful company that Licchavi Vimalakīrti delighted in.

These days, we’d probably describe a brash, extravagant, newly wealthy person as ‘nouveau-riche’. Vulgar and ostentatious, the nouveau-riche do things like plate every tooth in their head with gold, or rush to buy the new Hublot ‘one million dollar’ wristwatch without having seen it, or spend \$60,000 on a crocodile skin Hermès handbag. They over-do everything, as did Vimalakīrti. He was, in fact, a truly accomplished master of profligate excess.

When I think of Vimalakīrti, I see him surrounded by a superabundance of sinful luxury and attended by a legion of ravishing girls – two to hold his spoon for him, two to hold his plate, two to put fruit on the plate, two to peel his grapes, and probably even two to pop them in his mouth. I imagine him lazing for hours in a silk hammock as he gazed out of his bedroom window at exotic views of the Bihar jungle. When he ate, it would have been at a mahogany dining table on a floating platform in the middle of a lotus pond. His food would have been presented on turquoise plates, and he would have drunk only the finest wines from priceless lapis lazuli goblets. Of course, I'm giving my imagination free rein here, but I have a feeling that imagining is not only allowed in this context, it's actively encouraged. Just read the text, it's all there! Including marvellously detailed descriptions not only of his palace, but also his way of life.

I feel certain he frequently visited what we would call 'bars', where he drank intoxicating substances from tall jade cups. As for the 7-star pleasure houses of that time, I have no doubt that he would have been a much-loved regular. Deluded, petty-minded creatures like you and me, have no hope of imagining what those high-class pleasure houses were like, nor do we have the words to describe them – 'luxurious whore house', perhaps? Were we to visit such a place, even the coyest of glances from one of the sultry, voluptuous girls who worked there would send us spinning into a whirlwind of fantasy.

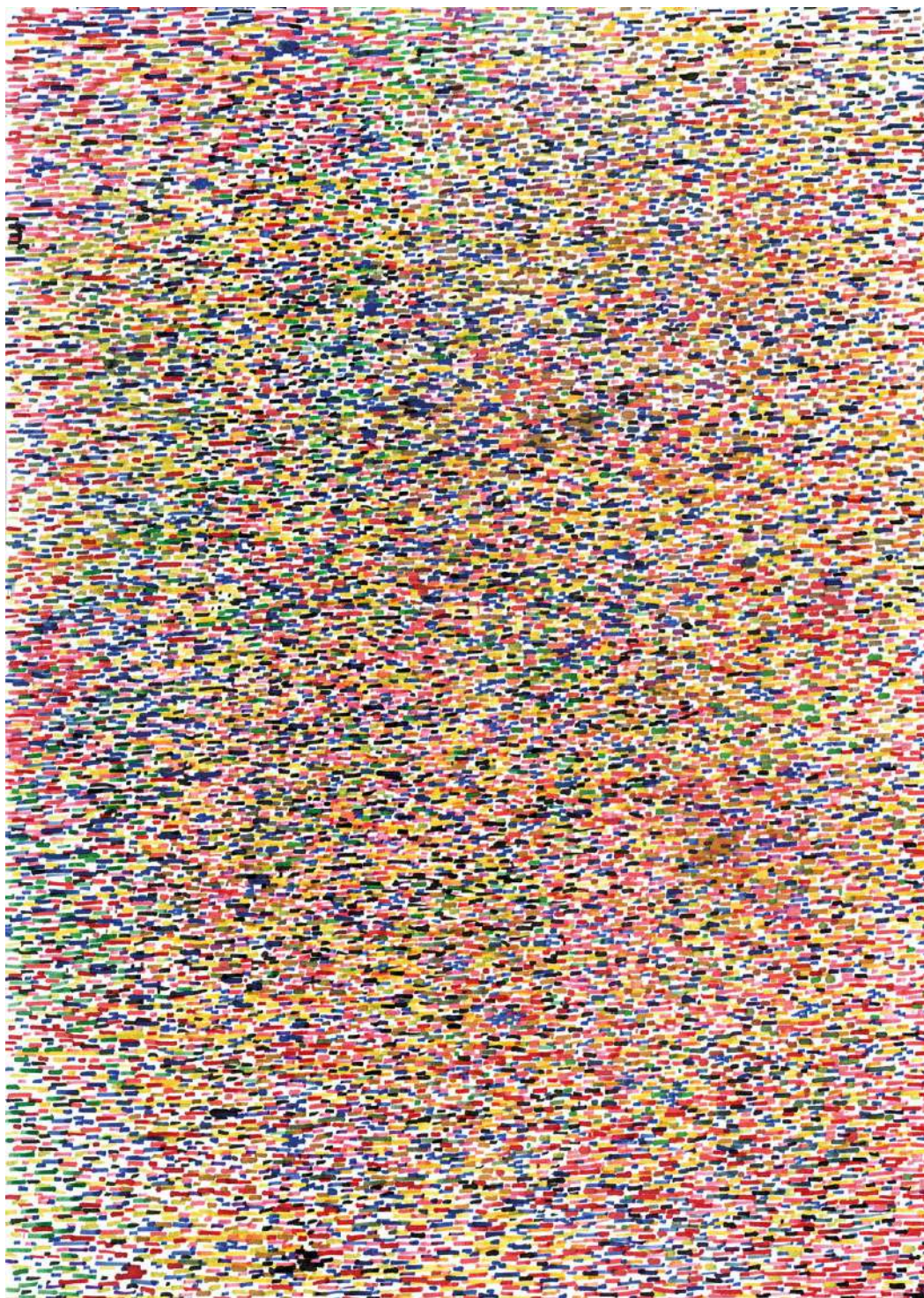
Vimalakīrti regularly rubbed shoulders with kings, scholars, ministers, warlords, generals and of course, obscenely rich and clever businessmen. But he was also a kind and generous philanthropist, who visited schools and took great care of children. Wherever he went, he greeted everyone he met regardless of their caste or occupation, even the farmers and roadsweepers. As a result, in spite of all his moral shortcomings and depravity, he was universally loved, respected and adored. He was an amazing character.

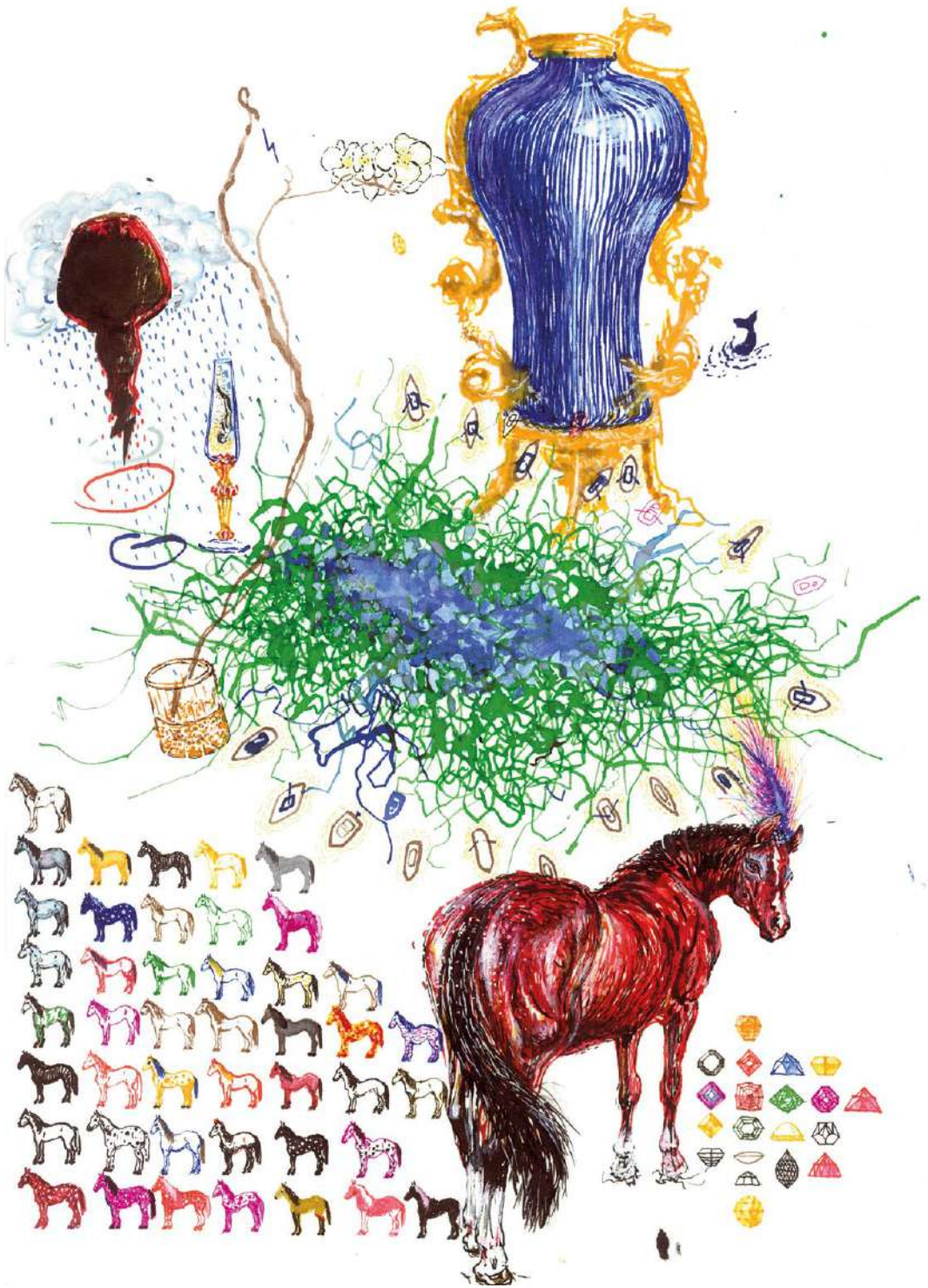
So, Vimalakīrti is the hero of this story. We meet him just after he had fallen ill, and this illness of his becomes the driving force of the sūtra. Vaiśālī was abuzz with the news that Vimalakīrti was in such poor health that he had taken to his bed. Flocks of well-wishers turned up at his palace, and you can just imagine the kinds of question they asked him.

"Are you drinking enough water?"

"Are you getting enough rest?"

"Have you tried the organic juice cure?" Or one of the other miracle cures being touted at the time. And so on.





All his friends, acquaintances and everyone who knew him was genuinely concerned and the city overflowed with visitors wanting to know how he was. All except one very special friend.

“No word yet from the Tathāgata?” thought Vimalakīrti. “I wonder why?” And miles away in the mango grove, the Buddha knew exactly what Vimalakīrti was thinking.

What followed inspired some of the most penetrating philosophical exchanges ever to have taken place on this earth. And it was all triggered by the hurt feelings of a sick, rich man who felt neglected because his most beloved friend hadn’t come to see him. What a wonderful way to begin a story.

## Śāriputra

Śāriputra, as I’ve already mentioned, was one of the Buddha’s closest apprentices and of great consequence in the Saṅgha. Temple murals usually show him standing on the Buddha’s right – Buddha’s right-hand man. Not only was Śāriputra renowned as the cleverest and most quick-witted of all the Buddha’s students, second only to the Buddha himself in terms of wisdom, he was also a pristinely pure monk. Remember this, because in a few pages it will look as though Vimalakīrti is making fun of him and, when he does, it’s important you remember that Śāriputra was neither a fool nor an idiot.

“Śāriputra,” said Buddha. “You should go to Vaiśālī to ask after Licchavi Vimalakīrti. He’s not well, poor man. But he’s always been a good friend of the Saṅgha, so I’d like you to visit him on my behalf to ask how he is.”

Śāriputra listened attentively and respectfully to his master’s request, but didn’t reply immediately. The other disciples were surprised. Usually, if Buddha asked Śāriputra to do something, he would have virtually completed the task before Buddha had even finished his sentence. So why, they wondered, did Śāriputra hesitate?

After an uncomfortably long pause, Śāriputra made a gesture of profound respect to his master, then began to speak.

“Oh no! Please, my Lord, please don’t send me!” He then told the Buddha about his most recent encounter with Vimalakīrti.

Śāriputra was meditating peacefully in the shade of a great tree, when suddenly, Licchavi Vimalakīrti appeared before him, as if out of nowhere.

“No, no, no! Śāriputra,” said Vimalakīrti, frowning. “What you’re doing is all wrong! That’s not how you meditate!”

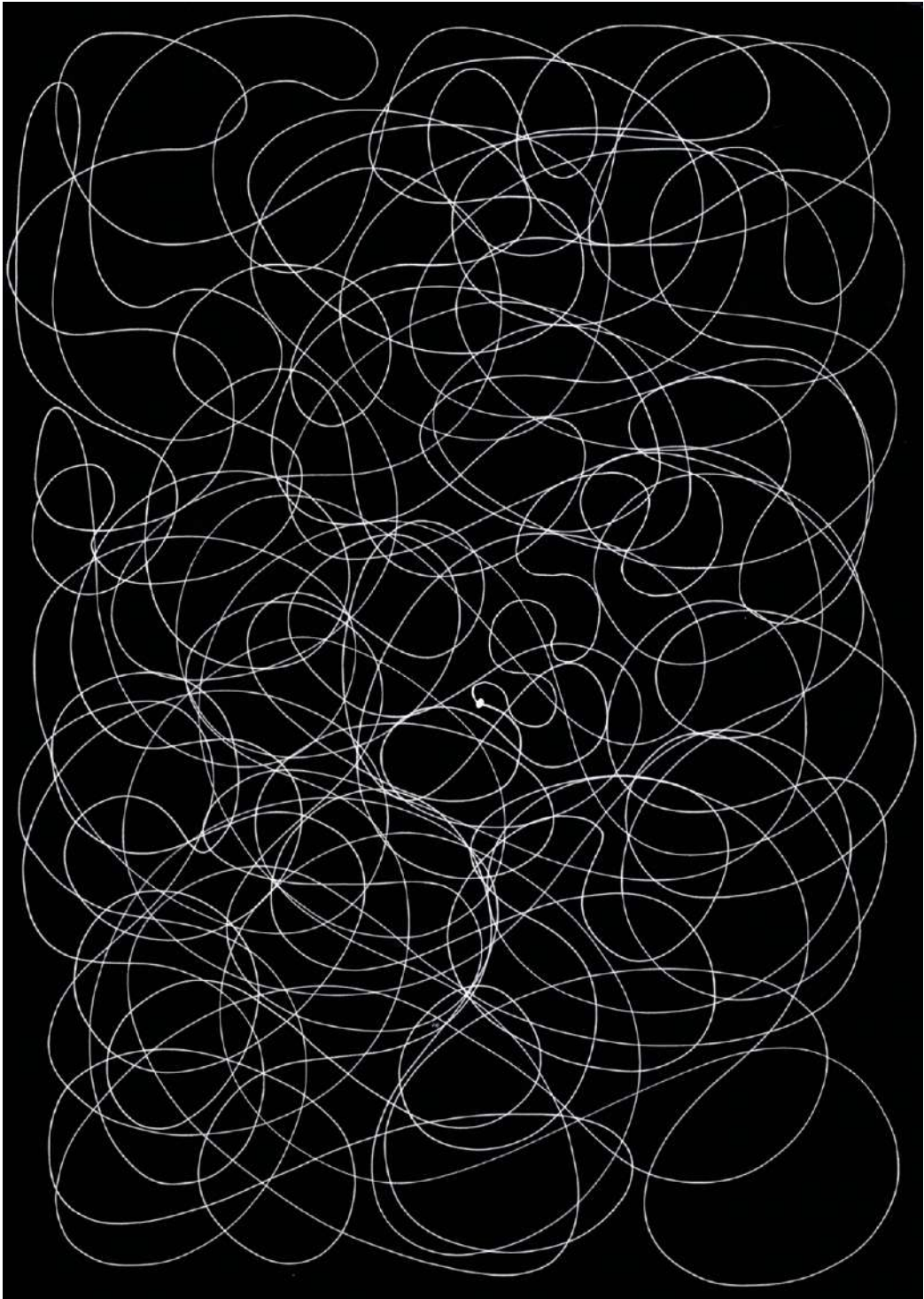
What follows is an extraordinarily profound teaching during which, with astonishing mastery, Vimalakīrti scrutinizes, dismantles and deconstructs the myth of meditation. Remember, Śāriputra was no charlatan. He was an authentic, highly realized master of meditation and exceptionally accomplished spiritually. His meditation was far more refined than we can even begin to imagine. For any of us to attempt to assess or judge the extent of his practice would be as ridiculous as trying to hold the entire sky in the palm of one hand. But of course, remarkable beings like Śāriputra would have seen no difference between the two, or between a handful of dust and a kilo of gold. He was a big-time Buddhist; nothing about him could be described as small-time. Yet it was Śāriputra to whom our friend, our hero, Vimalakīrti, addressed his criticisms. I must confess that most of what he said is way beyond my understanding, but I have often wondered if their exchange was deliberately staged. To me it looks as though Śāriputra and Vimalakīrti were acting out a scene in a play, perhaps as a way of guiding and liberating us, to help clear away our confusion.

For example, Vimalakīrti said, “You should never depart from cessation, neither should you depart from post-meditation activities.”

What on earth is he talking about? Is he really suggesting that we should never either ‘not meditate’, nor ‘not not meditate’? Because that is how my limited mind interprets what these two exceptional beings were saying to each other.

One of our biggest mistakes is that we automatically interpret ‘do not be distracted’ to mean that we should ‘abide’, ‘dwell’ and ‘concentrate’. We never imagine it might mean ‘let it float’ or ‘let it be’. At least, that’s what I think Vimalakīrti is saying here. But it’s difficult for ordinary practitioners to stop imagining that meditation is all about abiding, because initially that is what we are taught to do.

Can you imagine one of today’s meditation instructors telling you that you *shouldn’t* concentrate? Those of us who try to practise śamatha meditation now and then – never often enough, obviously – think that the right thing to do is to sit on a cushion and not to browse the internet. But even when we are sitting on a cushion, our minds are distracted. Instead of meditating, we replay an argument we just had, or worry about the state of our bank balance or our latest emotional crisis.



Today's meditation teachers encourage us to respond to our wilder thoughts with, "No, I'm not supposed to think like that. I should bring my attention back to my breath, and focus on the sensations I feel on the skin below my nostrils." Which we try to do. But of course, it doesn't take long for us to start thinking about our problems and so again, we bring our minds back to our breathing. It's a good method, a necessary one, and certainly a step in the right direction. But, from Vimalakīrti's point of view, this kind of meditation is far from ideal.

To put it simply, Vimalakīrti tells Śāriputra that true meditation is to *meditate* and *not meditate* at the same time; that a gap between meditation and post-meditation should not exist; and that the wall between distraction and concentration must collapse. If we just meditate, he says, we are basically doing nothing – and 'nothing' includes making a deliberate effort to do nothing. Instead, we must remain in the cessation – or meditative absorption, mindfulness, one-pointedness, whatever you want to call it – *without avoiding activity*. This seems to be Vimalakīrti's point.

So if you happen to be listening to music, go ahead, listen to the music. If you are chopping an onion, go ahead, chop your onion. As you chop, if your nose tingles, go ahead and scratch it. Do not try to escape activity. Be mindful, but also be active. Meditation isn't an excuse to stop doing things, but that is exactly what we end up doing – or not doing! What do you think about when you hear the word 'meditation'? Your zafu, not your chopping board. Or sitting with a straight back gazing at your shrine, not going for a swim.

Incidentally, the Vimalakīrti Sūtra isn't a gradual teaching, it falls into the highest category of teachings on the definitive meaning – nītārtha in Sanskrit. But just because you are reading a high teaching that contains all manner of extraordinary statements, don't now despise or look down on the gradual path, and don't kid yourself that you are ready to let go of the basic teachings. Remember, you are not Śāriputra – not one of us is a practitioner of his calibre.

At the same time, by reading this sūtra, we can eavesdrop on some uniquely insightful discussions that contain a great deal of information we need to hear. If we ignore these teachings, or don't bother to read or listen to them, chances are that the Buddhism of the future will pale into insignificance. Practitioners will end up doing little more than sit on zafus, eat vegetarian food, and pursue personal happiness and non-violence – which is utterly pathetic!



I have been told that ‘smile’ is currently a hashtag for Buddhism. It’s so embarrassing! Vimalakīrti would never have tolerated it. If he were alive today, he would ruthlessly rip apart and demolish the so-called ‘spiritual’ teachings that are currently being touted as the ‘truth’. What would he have to say about Buddhism’s ‘smile’ hashtag, and using ‘mindfulness’ as a therapy, I wonder?

If Buddhism must have a hashtag, it should be ‘meditate and don’t meditate at the same time, otherwise you’re not doing it right!’ Which is what Vimalakīrti said to Śāriputra. He also said, you should meditate as if you were already a stainless, immaculate, sublime being, but without giving up your ordinariness. Be sublime but don’t give up the mundane – that’s how you are supposed to meditate. Of course, you must also concentrate and you mustn’t get distracted, but that shouldn’t stop you from using your senses.

When we hear the word ‘meditate’, what do we do? Many of us immediately close our eyes in an attempt to escape our present reality. Vimalakīrti seems to disapprove of this approach. Beginners often find that closing their eyes helps. But if you have to close your eyes, shouldn’t you also block your ears and your nose? What about touch? What about all the feelings that come through your skin? And the most difficult one of all, how do you block off your mind? Yet, even if you manage to do all that, it’s not possible to perfect meditation merely by turning off your senses. And it’s my guess that this absurd blocking out is what Vimalakīrti is making fun of. But I must repeat that I can barely fathom a fraction of what is going on between Vimalakīrti and Śāriputra in this one sentence, let alone in the rest of the sūtra.

## **Maudgalyāyana**

Maudgalyāyana is another big name in the Buddha’s Saṅgha. He was also in the Buddha’s inner circle and one of his closest apprentices. Becoming the apprentice of the Enlightened One was probably something like giving up your studies at a highly respected art school to become the apprentice of a great sculptor or artist. Certainly many of the great arhats dedicated their entire lives to the Enlightened One, whom they followed like a shadow.

If you were to bump into Maudgalyāyana, you would probably mistake him for the Buddha himself; it was as if he had been cast from the same mould. In the sūtras Maudgalyāyana and Śāriputra appear together more

often than not, and temple murals usually place Śāriputra on Buddha's right and Maudgalyāyana on his left. Amongst his many other great qualities, Maudgalyāyana was a well-known and powerful miracle-worker.

It was quite natural, then, for Buddha to turn to Maudgalyāyana after Śāriputra had declined to visit Vimalakīrti on his behalf. Would Maudgalyāyana accept the commission?

"No, my Lord," replied Maudgalyāyana, with the same gesture of devotion and respect that Śāriputra had offered.

Another astonishing response, and one that must have both bewildered and fascinated the other disciples. Who was this man, Licchavi Vimalakīrti? And why were two such accomplished arhats, the mightiest of all the Buddha's disciples, doing their utmost to avoid him?

"I don't think I'm quite up to it," said Maudgalyāyana. He then went on to describe what had happened the last time he and Vimalakīrti met.

Maudgalyāyana was teaching a large gathering of laypeople, when quite suddenly, Vimalakīrti appeared before him, as if out of nowhere.

"Maudgalyāyana," said Vimalakīrti. "You shouldn't teach the dharma like that!"

Imagine this happening today. Imagine a famous contemporary Buddhist teacher being interrupted by a shiny little man with long black hair, a diamond-encrusted gold wrist watch and a very fat, very expensive cigar clenched between his whiter-than-white teeth. Imagine the look on the teacher's face when the man said, "You shouldn't teach the Dharma like that!" How would the teacher's sycophantic students react? "How dare he tell our perfect master how to teach!" perhaps?

Whatever the reactions, Vimalakīrti ignored them all and went on to deconstruct in meticulous detail, what is really meant by 'teach the Dharma'.

As there is no soul, no sentient being, no self, no birth, no death, no person, no past, no future, no words, no phrase, no colour, no shape, nothing to be abandoned and nothing to adopt, what is there to teach? So-called 'teaching' is nothing more than a fabrication, as is so-called 'listening'. Where there is fabrication, not one syllable of Dharma can be uttered. There is no such thing as 'hearing the Dharma' or 'expounding the Dharma', because there is only fabrication. Fabrication is all there is. It's a bit like a magician who creates two people. He makes one the expounder and the other the listener, but neither 'expounding' nor 'listening and contemplation' ever happen.



Vimalakīrti's statements are strikingly perceptive. Unfortunately, though, not only do petty-minded people like us fail to understand his words, we are irritated by everything he says. What is he talking about? How can a holy teaching be a mere fabrication? And what is wrong with teaching people to refrain from killing, stealing and lying? People need to hear this teaching, so surely this is what should be taught! It's the kind of teaching that not only helps us help ourselves, it helps us help others. As for karma and reincarnation, how can they be a fabrication? Don't they form one of the pillars of Buddhadharma, the essence of a spiritual path?

I have a message for the so-called Buddhists – especially those from Britain – who take pride in advertising themselves as pioneers of the notion that there can be Buddhism without beliefs and Buddhism beyond reincarnation. You are two and a half thousand years too late! The credit for these ideas lies solely with this rude, hedonistic, philanthropic businessman from Vaiśālī.

I may be assuming too much here, but isn't Vimalakīrti's point that as long as thinking and illusion are considered to be real, there will also be delusion. And that as long as there is delusion, there will be a path or method to awaken us from that delusion. But just as illusion is not real, neither is the path that liberates us from illusion. How can it be? If the snake you dreamt about last night was an illusion, how could the stick you used to drive the snake away be real? If the stick were real, then the snake would also have to be real. So Vimalakīrti seems to be saying that just as everything is an illusion, the path that liberates you from delusion is also an illusion. In this case, the path is the teaching. Therefore to teach, hear, understand and realize are all illusions.

You might ask, "Why then do we teach?"

We teach out of compassion for those who think illusion is real and have yet to realize that it isn't, and we teach for those with strong habits. Compassion compels us to apply every single skilful method available in our effort to help them, which means we must pretend to teach. By teaching, we can offer the person dreaming about a snake the choice of many kinds of stick to drive it away with; and by doing so, we serve the Buddhadharma. Our sole reason for teaching can only ever be the supreme objective of unconditional compassion. And if, out of compassion, we apply the skilful method of teaching, the light of the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha will continue to shine.

There are people in the West today who love to create a pick-and-mix kind of spiritual path for themselves. They do not hesitate to discard the branches of the traditional tree of Buddhist teachings that they cannot understand – reincarnation, for example, which they dismiss as being little more than a cultural Indian habit, an illusion. Yet they continue to promote, profit from and cling desperately to Buddhism’s other traditional branches, like mindfulness, meditation, morality and ethics.

Back in the mango grove, Maudgalyāyana wound up his story by saying that, after his encounter with Vimalakīrti, he had lost all confidence – but please bear in mind that out of their great compassion for people like me, Vimalakīrti and Maudgalyāyana almost certainly staged this encounter.

## **Kāśyapa**

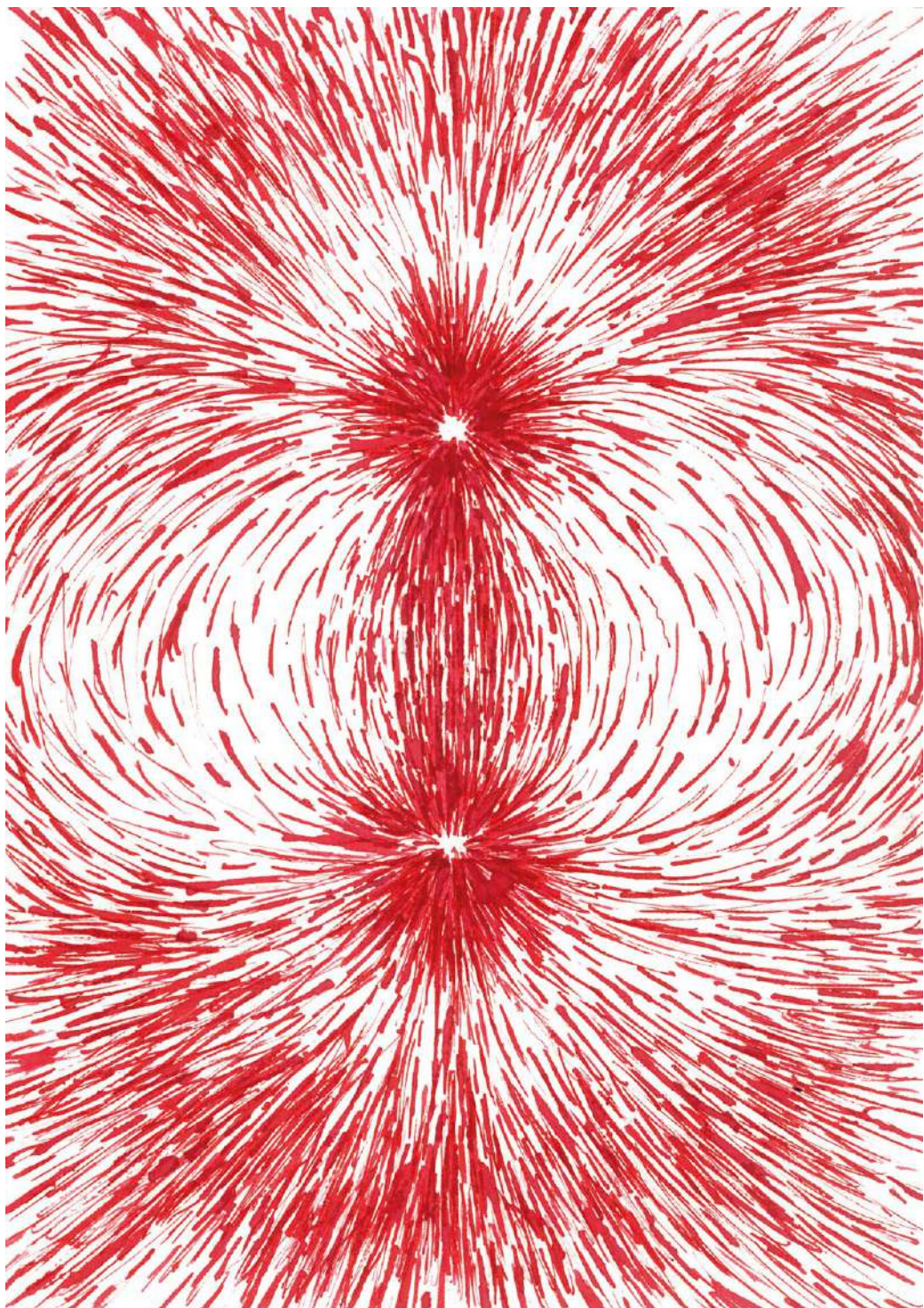
Next, Buddha turned to one of his greatest disciples, Kāśyapa, the monk whom Buddha himself appointed to be his regent. It was Kāśyapa who convened the first assembly of the Saṅgha, where the disciples began the process of compiling all Buddha’s teachings for the benefit of future generations – people like us. And he, too, had a very good reason for refusing to visit Vimalakīrti.

One morning, as he set out to beg for food, Kāśyapa thought to himself, “Today I will beg from the poor because the poor need to accumulate merit.”

As he went from door to door in the poorest neighbourhood of Vaiśālī, Vimalakīrti suddenly appeared before him, as if out of nowhere.

“What are you doing, Kāśyapa?” asked Vimalakīrti. “Why are you begging from the poor? That’s such a big mistake! Why are you discriminating between rich and poor! You shouldn’t do that! When you beg, it should be with an attitude of equanimity and compassion for *all* sentient beings.”

With these words, Vimalakīrti pulls the rug out from under everyone’s feet. We are so contaminated with political correctness that we pick and choose the objects of our compassion. Not only are our minds dualistic, so is our compassion. Should we only feel compassion for a poor, sick, destitute orphan? Or stray dogs? Are we really being compassionate when we go out of our way to save a rabid dog’s life, but feel smugly satisfied when that very dog bites Donald Rumsfeld? Or if we help an orphan from Bangladesh rather



than a billionaire, like Donald Trump? Our hearts go out to the homeless in bitter weather, but we remain entirely unmoved by a tweet about Bill Gates being served a tough steak for dinner. What Vimalakīrti seems to be saying to Kāśyapa is that everyone, the rich and the poor, the famous and the insignificant, should all be equal objects of our compassion.

One of the most important remarks Vimalakīrti makes in this section is that Kāśyapa should beg alms from short-sighted, deluded beings who see a part and imagine it to be the whole. It's a statement that never fails to impress me. Isn't he talking about all of us? We look at ourselves, yet we don't see that we are fragmented, transitory collections of bits and bobs that are subject to time, space, name, decay and interpretation. We don't see the different pieces, we just see a whole. For example, I would argue that I am a man. But if I were dismantled and reduced to a pile of atoms, not even I could point to one of those atoms and call it a man. Yet I am convinced that I have a gender – that I am a man. It's an idea I'm stuck with, and surely someone as stuck as me should also have the opportunity to accumulate merit.

But remember, Vimalakīrti was a layperson.

“If a layperson can talk like this,” said Kāśyapa to Buddha, “If a layperson can be this accomplished, how can we *not* believe that *the enlightenment of all sentient beings is possible.*”

“That was when I stopped giving the teachings that only lead to self-liberation,” said Kāśyapa, which must mean that from then on he only taught the path that leads all sentient beings to liberation.

“By the time Vimalakīrti had finished talking” said Kāśyapa, “he had well and truly crushed my pride. I can't bear the thought of seeing him again!”

## Subhūti

Another character who appears in this sūtra is Subhūti. Many of us already know him because he pops up in quite a number of other sūtras. I have a feeling he was a very curious person and single-minded in his pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. After all, it was Subhūti's conversation with the Buddha that became the Vajracchedikā Sūtra.

Even so, when Buddha asked Subhūti if he would visit Vaiśālī, he refused, because he too had had an unsettling encounter with Vimalakīrti.

Contrary to present-day prejudices about beggars, in ancient India and much of Asia begging for alms as a monk was a noble way of life – a ‘right’ way to live. The Tathāgata himself begged for food, and there are many beautiful stories about the people he met as he begged and how he helped them, often changing the entire course of their lives.

On one occasion, the Tathāgata insisted on visiting the ramshackle dwelling of a destitute woman, who herself did not have a single grain of rice to eat. When Buddha approached her holding out his begging bowl, as she had no food, she offered to darn a small hole she had noticed in his robes. At that moment, according to the sūtras, the earth shook, a rainbow filled the sky, and Śāriputra, who was attending the Buddha that day, smiled an unusually radiant smile. Later, when his fellow monks asked Śāriputra what had so delighted him, he said, “In Tushita heaven at this very moment, the gods are building a palace for that old woman. She will go there the moment she leaves this earth.”

Which makes the story of Subhūti’s encounter with Licchavi Vimalakīrti all the more surprising.

The day Subhūti visited Vimalakīrti’s house to beg for alms, a great deal of delicious food had already been prepared especially for him.

All Subhūti had to do was wait patiently at the kitchen door while Vimalakīrti personally filled his bowl.

As Vimalakīrti piled on one last spoonful, he said, “Now, Subhūti, you should only accept this offering if you have truly understood that all phenomena, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, possessions and enlightened qualities are equal.”

Vimalakīrti was so cheeky!

“You should only accept this offering,” he continued, “if you *haven’t* abandoned desire, anger and ignorance, yet remain unstained by them.”

And that wasn’t all.

“You should only accept this offering if you are not a victim of transitory phenomena; if you have not abandoned craving, yet remain unstained by it; if you have never heard of the Four Noble Truths, yet never violated them; and if you have never seen the Buddha, never heard the Dharma and never venerated the Saṅgha...”, and so on.

Instantly, Subhūti felt extremely depressed – so depressed that all ten directions went pitch black and his begging bowl slipped through his fingers to the ground. He tried to run away, but Vimalakīrti stopped him.



“Subhūti, don’t be afraid. Take the food. I want to ask you a question.”

Vimalakīrti was absolutely relentless!

“If the Tathāgata had said what I just said and if he had been addressing an illusory being, would that illusory being have been afraid? Of course he wouldn’t! Because he was an illusion. Don’t you see! Not only was everything I said an illusion, but I didn’t say it to anyone at all! My words were illusory. Therefore, Subhūti, there is no need to be afraid of accepting and eating this food, which is itself an illusion.”

After that, like Maudgalyāyana, Subhūti lost all confidence.

“I can’t face that holy being again,” he told the Buddha. “Not again. Please don’t send me.”

## Rāhula

Rāhula was Buddha’s only son. But when asked to visit Vimalakīrti on his father’s behalf, even Rāhula respectfully declined.

One day, Rāhula was hanging out with a crowd of young men from Licchavi. The young men knew quite a lot about Rāhula and were curious to know why he had given up the life of a prince to become a monk.

“You are the son of the Buddha,” they said. “But you are also a prince. Tell us, why did you give up your royal life and all your riches? Is renouncing all that wealth really such a great thing to do? What is the point?”

Seizing the opportunity to explain the benefits of monastic life, Rāhula told them how soothing he found life as a simple monk. Being a monk made him feel at ease, he said, and brought with it a tremendous sense of freedom. What kind of freedom, they asked? He no longer had to lock away his treasures, said Rāhula, or make inventories of his household goods, or maintain an extensive property portfolio, and much more.

Suddenly Vimalakīrti appeared before Rāhula, as if out of nowhere, and prostrated.

“Rāhula, listen to yourself! Listen to what you’re saying about the benefits of becoming a monk. You really shouldn’t talk like that!”

“Why not?” asked Rāhula.

“Because there is no benefit in renouncing palaces and riches. And there is no benefit in becoming a monk,” replied Vimalakīrti.

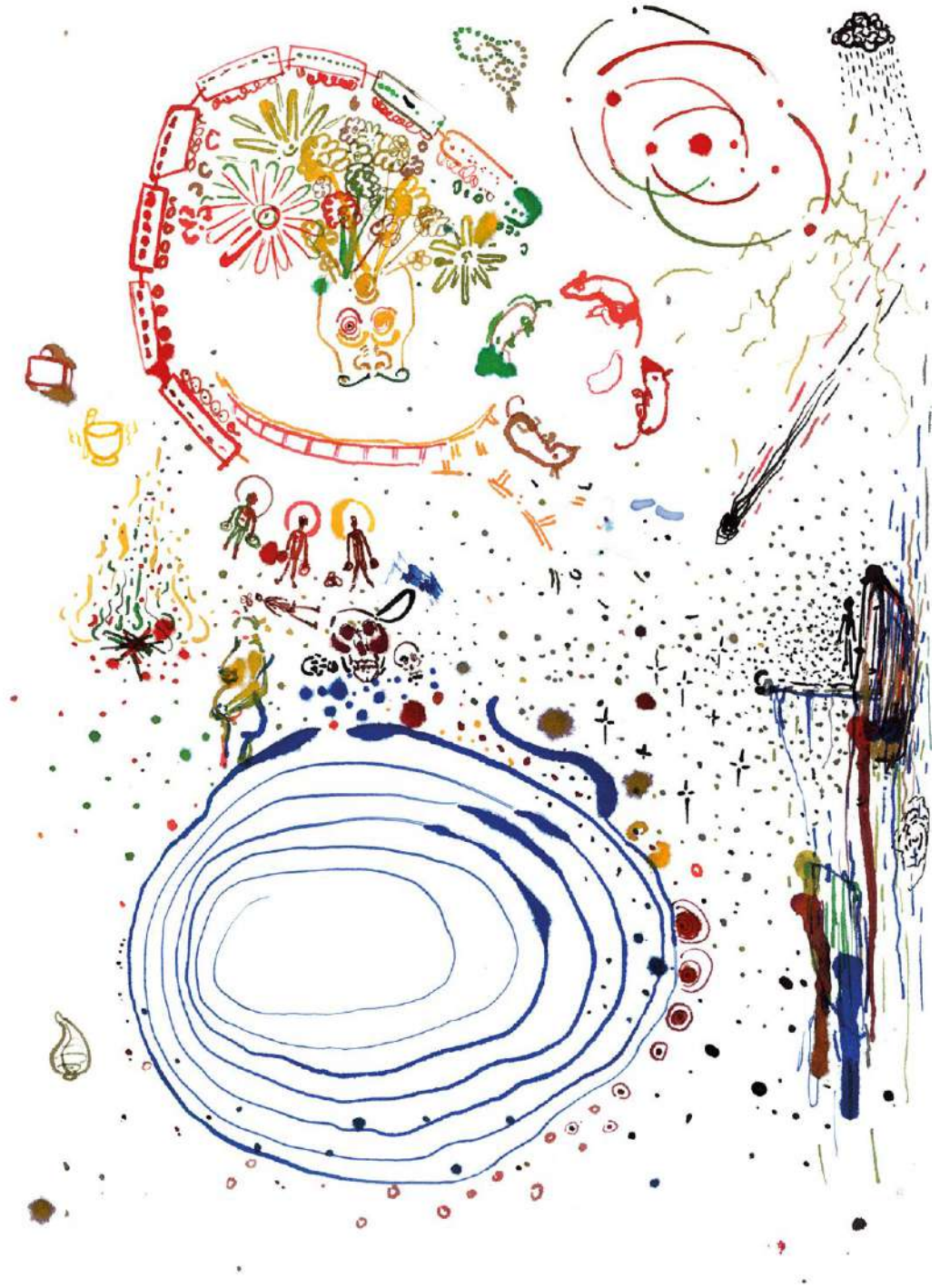
I don't think people like us can ever fully grasp just how shocking that statement must have been. Especially as it came from the mouth of the arch-hedonist Vimalakīrti, who embodied the very antithesis of renunciation. Not only that, Vimalakīrti was addressing Rāhula, the only son of Lord Buddha and a Prince of the Shakyas – he was no ordinary monk. By renouncing saṃsāric life in order to follow his father's teachings, Rāhula had turned his back on unimaginable wealth and privilege. Regardless of where and when we live, such a sacrifice is worthy of the highest praise and should be emulated.

But if we examine what was going on more closely, it becomes clear that Vimalakīrti wasn't criticising Rāhula for being a monk. What he was doing was scrutinizing so-called 'benefit' to work out precisely what it meant, so that he could then dismantle it.

To 'benefit' implies that we get or acquire something. The trouble is that having to get anything always causes problems. If something can be got or achieved or accomplished, it must be a compounded phenomenon. Therefore, to be a true renunciant, we must renounce not only all causes, but also all results, which means we must not only renounce worldly life, but also the benefits of becoming a monk or a nun.

A discussion about renunciation almost always involves talking about revulsion and temptation, and so on. It's not just Buddhists who value such principles, many of the world's religions embrace the idea of renunciation and have designed methods for practising it to suit their tradition. This suggests that the majority of people think temptation and luxury are bad, even diabolical manifestations that they would be better off without. Buddhism includes similar teachings, but they are meant for those of us whose ability to digest new ideas is weak and who find it easier to chew on the soggy teachings. For example, to help us crush desire, attachment, temptation and so on, we're told that gold and silver are bad. Monks are taught to deal with their desire for girls by thinking about the pus and blood and shit that make up a girl's body; and of course, political correctness obliges me to point out that nuns are supposed to think the same about boys.

But that isn't the kind of renunciation Vimalakīrti is talking about here. His subject is absolute renunciation. If you think something is beautiful and desirable, your desire will bind you to it; and exactly the same thing happens when you think it is ugly and reject it. Both thoughts create the same amount of clinging and if you cling, you haven't renounced.



This is why Vimalakīrti makes fun of Rāhula. If you really want to renounce saṃsāra, he says, you must first know that there is nothing to renounce. It's like winning a billion dollars in a dream and immediately giving it all to charity. Is your donation an act of generosity? Yes it is, but only in the dream. Did you really give a billion dollars to charity? No, because neither the billion dollars nor the charity ever existed. This is the level of renunciation that Vimalakīrti is talking about here.

Ultimately, we accomplish a genuine act of renunciation – or penance, or austerity – when we recognize that what we are renouncing is like a dream or an illusion; knowing that, we renounce illusory projections. A bodhisattva will only be able to perfect renunciation once she knows the true nature of what she renounces. She will then have established 'renunciation mind'.

In the Mahāyāna – in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra and several sūtras like it – everything, even enlightenment, is said to be a dream or an illusion. But Vimalakīrti goes even further. He says that if there were something beyond or greater than enlightenment, that too would be a dream or an illusion.

Once again, I can only speculate about what Vimalakīrti is really getting at, but it might be that if you have a goal, if your aim is to benefit or to achieve a result or a reward, you lack true renunciation and therefore your activity is not genuine Dharma practice. That is not to say that being a monk, like Rāhula, was an aimless, fruitless, or meaningless existence; the point here is that 'aimlessness' is the aim. Basically, if you don't realize that the goal of your practice is an illusion – if you think it's real – and if your aspirations and actions in pursuit of that goal are based on a wrong view, whatever you do is *not* genuine Dharma practice.

In Buddhist teachings, words like 'result', 'aim' or 'perfection' often appear and are deliberately chosen for people like us, who can only chew soggy food and are in love with the idea of a result, a bottom-line, and especially, productivity.

## Ānanda

Next comes Ānanda, another huge figure in the history of Buddhism. He was the Buddha's cousin and served as his personal attendant for many years. He also compiled the majority of Buddha's teachings; most famously, all the sūtras that begin, "Thus have I heard" – including the Vimalakīrti

Sūtra – which he recited from memory at the first Buddhist council. Yet even Ānanda was unwilling to visit Vimalakīrti.

One day, as the Buddha wasn't feeling very well, his doctors recommended that he drink some milk. Ānanda hurried to the home of a Brahmin family who he knew would be more than happy to make such an offering and, as he waited by the kitchen door for his jug to be filled, Vimalakīrti suddenly appeared before him, as if out of nowhere.

“Ānanda,” said Vimalakīrti. “What are you doing here?”

“Buddha is ill. It's not serious, but his doctors say we should offer him some milk. So I came here to get some.”

“What are you saying? You can't say that!” exclaimed Vimalakīrti, aghast.

In a fit of theatrical panic – and again, I have a feeling this encounter might have been staged – Vimalakīrti dragged Ānanda into a shadowy corner of the courtyard. His eyes darted right and left, like a hunted animal. Was anyone close enough to see or overhear them?

“Ānanda please lower your voice!” hissed Vimalakīrti, as he grabbed Ānanda's robes and leant uncomfortably close to his ear. “You can never, ever say such things!” By now his eyes were bulging. “Buddha is like a vajra, how could he ever fall ill? Buddha has crushed all non-virtue, how could he ever get sick? You'd better get out of here right now! Go! Be quick! Be quiet! And don't tell anyone what you were doing.”

Imagine how baffled Ānanda must have been, as he stood open-mouthed watching Vimalakīrti play out his scene.

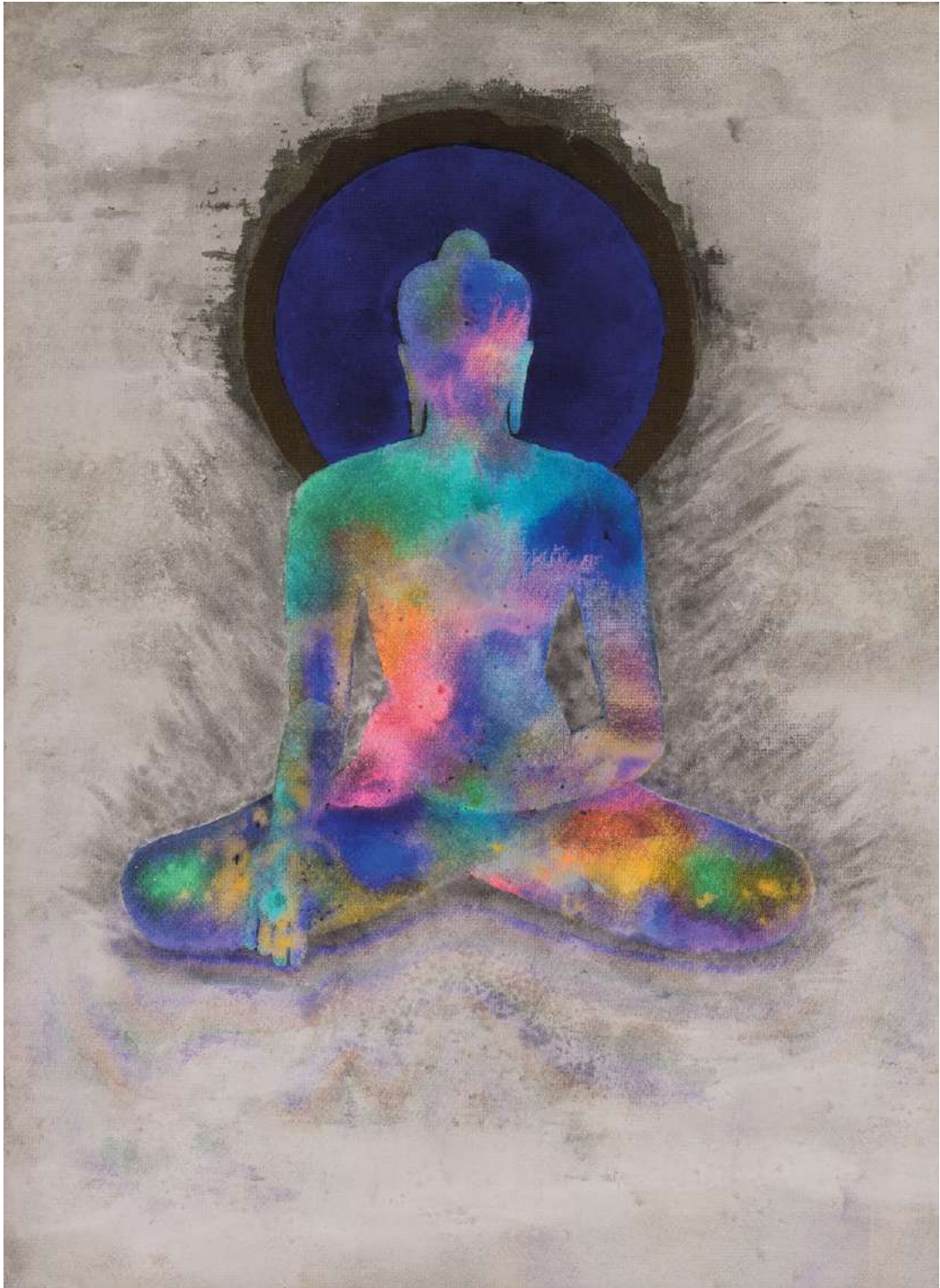
“Don't you see, Ānanda, how devastating the scandal could be. If it got out, you'd be utterly disgraced.”

Glancing fearfully into the sky, Vimalakīrti flinched, as if he had just realized something terrible.

“Argh! The gods are clairvoyant. You know that, don't you? They already know what you were thinking! If the great bodhisattvas get to hear about it, you'll never be able to show your face here again!”

Vimalakīrti pushed Ānanda deeper into shadow, as if he needed hiding.

“And what about the followers of all the other religions? If they hear what you just said, we are all done for! Don't you see? They'll say that if Buddha can't even cure himself of a trivial illness, how could he possibly live up to his aspiration of enlightening all sentient beings? Ānanda, you must leave this place! Go! And make sure no one sees you.”



By now, of course, Vimalakīrti was really hamming it up. But he also had a point. The nature of ‘buddha’ is absent from the concepts of ‘emotion’, ‘time’ and ‘compounded phenomena’. Or to put it another way, the absolute truth that is buddha, which is not conceptual, cannot be expressed in words, and is beyond the constructs we label as ‘emotion’, ‘time’ and ‘compounded phenomena’. It was therefore impossible for the Buddha either to fall ill or to get well again.

Once Vimalakīrti had pointed this out, Ānanda realized it was true. His embarrassment hit like lightning and was so excruciatingly painful that he immediately turned to flee the courtyard, but was stopped in his tracks by a mysterious voice that boomed from the sky.

“When the Tathāgata appeared on this earth to tame degenerate beings, he took the form of Prince Siddhārtha, son of Śuddhodana and Mahāmāyā. To give beings the opportunity to help him, he will sometimes look pale, hungry or thirsty, and by helping him, sentient beings will accumulate merit. So there is no need to be embarrassed, Ānanda. Take the milk and offer it to the Buddha.”

“But,” said Ānanda to Buddha, as he humbly wrapped up his story, “I daren’t approach Vimalakīrti again, my Lord. Not yet...”

## Maitreya

Maitreya was also present in the mango grove. But when the Buddha asked him to be his emissary, even the future Buddha proved reluctant because he too had suffered the indignity of being corrected by Licchavi Vimalakīrti.

It had happened in a heaven where Maitreya, who was still living as a heavenly being, was teaching a group of gods and goddesses about no longer taking rebirth in saṃsāra – ‘non-returning’. Once again, as if out of nowhere, Vimalakīrti suddenly appeared before him.

“From what I hear,” said Vimalakīrti, “The Tathāgata has said that you will become this world’s next Buddha. Is that true?”

By making the statement that Maitreya would be reborn as the Buddha in his next life, the Tathāgata was confirming the truth that all saṃsāric beings reincarnate. Yet here, Vimalakīrti systematically and extremely successfully deconstructs the whole concept of reincarnation.

“*What* is being reincarnated?” he asked, “*Who* is being reincarnated?” and “Will the reincarnated being be the same in their next life, or different?”

“Śākyamuni prophesied that you, Maitreya, will be the next Buddha. Do you know what that means? It means that *everyone*, not just you, will be reborn as a buddha.”

This is a crucially important statement, but Vimalakīrti doesn’t stop there.

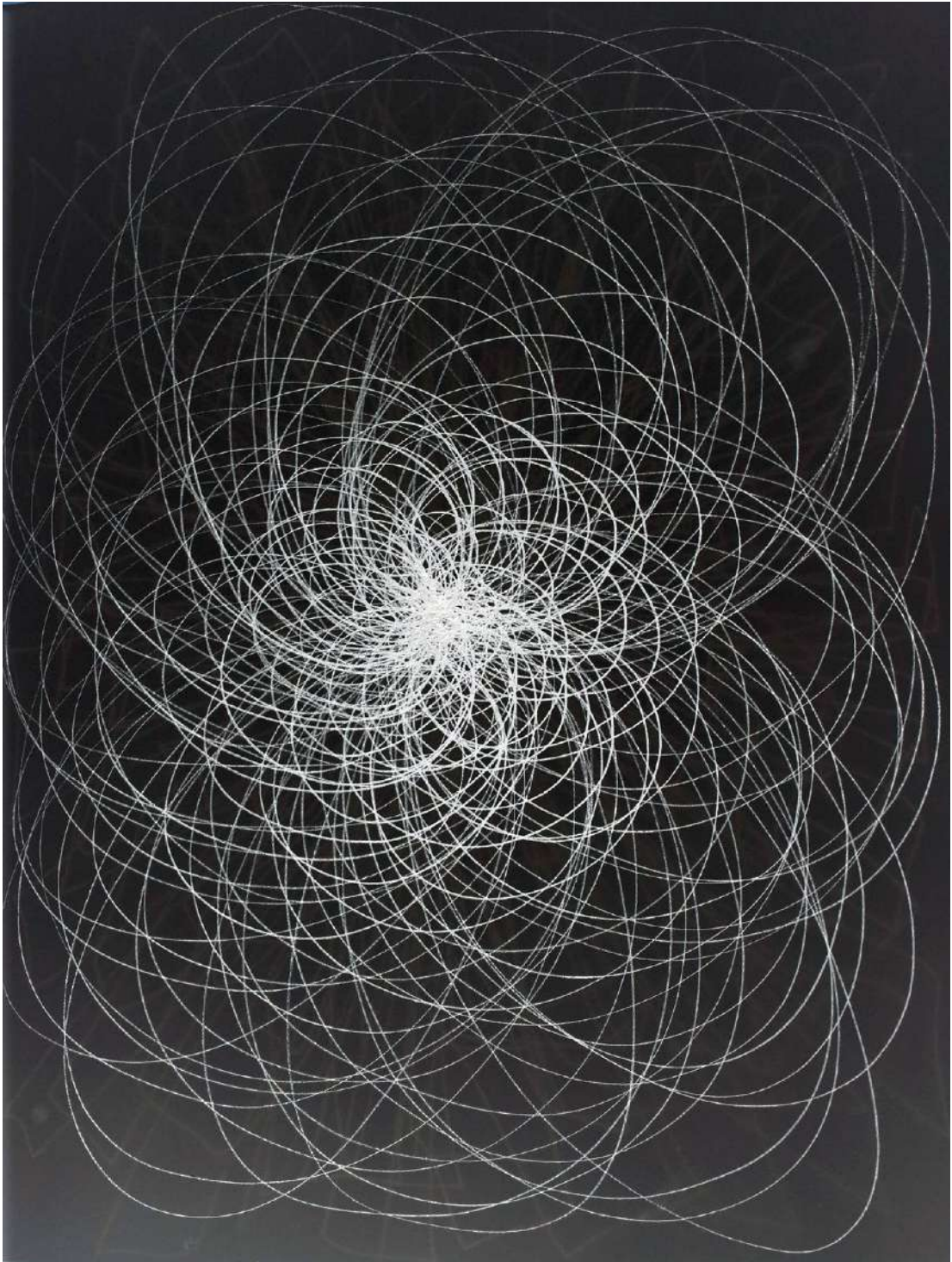
“When you attain absolute liberation, Maitreya, all sentient beings will also attain absolute realization.”

Those of us who have been marinating in Buddhism for a while know at least one prayer that includes the line, “May all sentient beings attain enlightenment”. But what does it mean? Are we praying for world peace? Are we wishing for something we don’t believe could happen, but pray for it because we think it is the right, even the politically correct thing to do? Or what?

Would anyone on this earth dare suggest that world peace is entirely impossible? Absolutely not! Yet the goal of a future in which everyone lives together peacefully is, sadly, one hundred percent *unachievable*. If that’s the case, what about the enlightenment of all sentient beings? Is it as futile a goal as world peace? Not at all. Universal enlightenment is one hundred percent *achievable*. The Mahāyāna aspiration that all sentient beings attain enlightenment isn’t simply a matter of goodwill, or a touchy-feely, ‘we are all one, we are all buddha’ brand of wishful thinking. Nor is it the kind of aspiration that deep down we cannot truly believe in. It’s not like that at all.

From the absolute point of view, all phenomena have always been pure. They have therefore always been devoid of faults, defilements and negative emotions, all of which are temporary. Put another way, because faults and defilements are temporary, they don’t come close to being the true nature of all phenomena. And this is why we can be confident in the belief that all sentient beings really can become enlightened.

What Vimalakīrti says next is also extremely important, especially for us. How many of us think that, at the very least, we should aspire to work hard and practise the Dharma in order to attain enlightenment? Probably quite a few. But think about it, what does ‘enlightenment’ mean? In your heart of hearts, what do *you* think enlightenment is? Do you long for enlightenment because you think it would be like taking an unimaginably long holiday? An endless break during which, at long last, you don’t have to make appointments, or suffer the hustle and bustle of saṃsāra? Is your idea of enlightenment not having or needing to do anything at all?



What Vimalakīrti seems to be saying here is that the notions that enlightenment is a ‘crossing over’, or ‘shrugging off’, or ‘finishing’, or ‘passing through the journey of saṃsāra’, are wrong. It’s equally wrong to imagine that our final achievement is an enlightened state called nirvāṇa. Everything is and has from the beginningless beginning been pristine, pure and beyond duality. So thinking that we need to enlighten or purify anyone or anything couldn’t be more wrong. And if Maitreya is saying anything different, says Vimalakīrti...

“... you are deceiving these divine beings! Don’t do it! Don’t leave these young gods and goddesses with the impression that enlightenment is a never-ending holiday...” in Goa or Hawaii... “It’s not! And anyway, no genuine bodhisattva would want to achieve that kind of enlightenment, because no genuine bodhisattva would want to spend forever doing nothing.”

I think he’s right. Just imagine taking a twelve-year holiday in Hawaii. Ask yourself, how many times could you walk on Waikiki Beach before you got bored? How many times could you enthusiastically shop for sunglasses? How many different brands of suntan lotion could you get excited about? So how long before doing nothing in Hawaii for twelve long years becomes a nightmare? All of which is why Vimalakīrti went on to say, “You shouldn’t present enlightenment as the final destination. Don’t deceive these divine youngsters by saying that!

“Liberation isn’t merely about freeing your body or your mind; liberation is to be free of all references, marks or signs.

“Enlightenment is having no references at all; it is beyond reference.

“Enlightenment cannot be defined by subjective mind.

“Enlightenment cannot be fabricated, contrived or made-up.

“Enlightenment is not make-believe.

“Enlightenment is not the by-product of hopes or wishes.

“Enlightenment is beyond all views.

“Enlightenment cannot be wished for – how can you wish for liberation?

“Enlightenment is neither abandoning, nor adopting; it is beyond grasping and beyond fixation.

*“Enlightenment is none other than knowing everything is equal.”*

Bear in mind that this conversation happened two thousand five hundred years ago in the shade of a grove of mango trees. Even today, with all the tools, scholars, libraries and research grants we have at our fingertips, we are still struggling to understand this astonishingly daring, revolutionary,

deliberately self-defeating text that makes a mockery of its own theories and laughs at its own dogma.

Why self-defeating? Whenever words are used, we are instantly drawn into the world of references, labels and concepts; but enlightenment – which is famously beyond all that, therefore impossible to understand intellectually, conceptually, or referentially – cannot be described in words. As you can see, Vimalakīrti’s scrutiny of the teachings was of an exceptionally high standard, and you can’t get more objective than that.

## Jagatindhara

Next, Buddha asked the famously pure monk Jagatindhara to visit Vimalakīrti on his behalf. But as Jagatindhara had been implicated in a situation involving both Vimalakīrti and some breathtakingly beautiful girls, about which he was excruciatingly embarrassed, he didn’t want to go.

Jagatindhara was teaching in his room one day when, without warning, the Lord of the Gods, Indra, strode in, followed by an entourage of voluptuous girls.

“At least he *looked* like Indra,” said Jagatindhara. “And who else would have brought so many beautiful goddesses with him?”

Indra is one of the greatest patrons and protectors of the Buddha’s Dharma. He has always stood guard over the Buddha’s teachings and, to this very day, watches over Buddha’s followers with unwavering solicitude.

“Actually, when I saw just how many goddesses followed Lord Indra into the room, I felt obliged to warn him against temptation,” continued Jagatindhara. “Make your life worthwhile, I said. Use your precious body meaningfully. Don’t be too greedy. Remember impermanence.”

I think Jagatindhara was being a bit predictable here. Who among us wouldn’t expect a good, concerned and compassionate monk to lecture a sensualist? But what happened next was anything but predictable. To Jagatindhara’s astonishment, the moment he finished speaking, Indra offered him all his girls.

“How can you even think of doing such a thing?” replied Jagatindhara. “I’m a monk! You of all people must know that the sons of Śākya are celibate!”

Śākya was the Buddha's family name and, after taking monastic vows, monks and nuns were said to be the son or daughter of the Śākya. Whether a person was originally born into the family of a cobbler, gangster, shoemaker or untouchable – no matter what their original bloodline or caste – once they became a monastic, they belonged to the Buddha's family, the Śākyas.

"To offer even one girl to a monk is downright offensive!" continued Jagatindhara, deeply offended. "But you've offered me a whole flock!"

As they argued the pros and cons of such an offering, suddenly, as if out of nowhere, Vimalakīrti stormed into the room.

"Jagatindhara, what are you doing? How could you mistake this creature for the Lord of the Gods? Open your eyes! Can't you see it's Māra, the Lord of Illusion..." – the Devil, Satan, the evil one, the Deceiver, whatever you want to call him – "He's in disguise because his intentions are to deceive you. And you've fallen for it!"

Māra is called the 'Lord of Illusion' because he can disguise himself as anyone or anything. He also has the ability to disappear at will.

"And you," shouted Vimalakīrti, turning to Māra. "How can you even think of giving a monk all these girls? What does he need girls for?"

Vimalakīrti then took a deep breath.

"So tell you what," he said. "Why don't you give them all to me instead?"

At that moment, the only thought in Māra's head was how to escape – this Licchavi really terrified him and he was desperate to vanish and get as far away from Vimalakīrti as possible. But as Vimalakīrti was immeasurably stronger, he easily overpowered Māra's magical abilities and Māra was stuck.

As he cowered before Vimalakīrti, a voice from the sky boomed, "You should offer your girls to Vimalakīrti. Until you do, you won't be able to disappear."

Māra instantly made the offering and Vimalakīrti accepted every one of his beautiful girls – who weren't really goddesses at all, they were demonesses.

"Now that you're all mine," said Vimalakīrti, "the first thing you must do is make the bodhisattva vow."

When we make the bodhisattva vow, we promise not only not to harm other beings, but to actively help them. And not to help in a meagre or trivial way; we promise to help them to understand the truth. This is the vow that Vimalakīrti made all the demonesses make.

Meanwhile, Jagatindhara was feeling wretched about how easy it had been for Māra to deceive him. I also suspect he had instantly succumbed to a crush on at least one of the girls and was applying every method he could think of to resist her. (Only Māra could summon such irresistible temptresses). On top of which Jagatindhara had just witnessed how easily Vimalakīrti, of all people, had dealt with Māra. Vimalakīrti's legendary and unbridled self-indulgence should have made him Māra's ideal victim, yet Vimalakīrti had made a mockery of both Māra and his diabolical methods. So all in all, Jagatindhara must have been feeling extremely uncomfortable.

"Now that you have made the bodhisattva vow," said Vimalakīrti to the girls, "The only thing you are allowed to long for is Supreme Joy. That means you can no longer wish for mundane worldly bliss."

"What is this 'only' thing that we are supposed to long for?" asked the girls. "What is 'Supreme Joy'?"

"Supreme Joy is to admire and adore the Buddha," replied Vimalakīrti.

"Supreme Joy is to admire and adore the Dharma, and to long to hear the words of the Dharma.

"Supreme Joy is to admire, pay homage to and serve the Saṅgha.

"Supreme Joy is to crush your own ego and pride.

"Supreme Joy is not getting caught up or stuck in objects of pleasure.

"Supreme Joy is to see all five aggregates as gruesome butchers.

"Supreme Joy is to see that all your elements are completely unpredictable, like temperamental snakes.

"Supreme Joy is to see all your senses and sensory perceptions as empty cities.

"Supreme Joy is always to treasure bodhichitta.

"Supreme Joy is to long to help others, to aspire to be generous, and the joy of practising discipline, patience, diligence, single-minded concentration and stainless wisdom.

"Supreme Joy is to be enthusiastic about hanging out with those who share the same views you do – views like, 'all compounded things are impermanent', 'all emotions are pain', etc.

"Supreme Joy is not to disdain those who do not share your view, but to be patient, tolerant and open-minded.

"Supreme Joy is to pay homage to and revere the Guru.

"Supreme Joy is to detach yourself from friends who exert a bad influence over you.



“Supreme Joy is the wish to practise the Dharma.”

And a lot more besides – it must have taken Vimalakīrti quite some time to get through the entire list. The moment he finished, Māra, the girls’ former boss, said, “Let’s go home.”

“But you just gave us away. You gave us to *him!*” protested the girls. “And *he* says we aren’t allowed to like the things we used to like. We’re supposed to like other things now!”

“Hey you!” said Māra, as he turned to face Vimalakīrti. “Aren’t you supposed to be a bodhisattva? Shouldn’t you have no attachments? Aren’t you supposed to be able to give up everything? Let’s see you do it. Give up these girls. Give them up right now! Or can’t you let go of them now that you’ve got them?”

“OK...” said Vimalakīrti, smiling slightly. “I’ll let them go. And by the way, it’s time for you and your retinue to go back to where you came from.”

The girls didn’t like that idea one bit and instantly confronted Vimalakīrti.

“You are the one who made us take the bodhisattva vow! You are the one who told us that we should like this and not like that. Yet you are the one who is now sending us back to Māra’s world, where it’s dark and sinful and degenerate. How will we cope?”

And now, the unexpected twist...

“Girls,” said Vimalakīrti, pacifically. “You must invest all your time and energy in the ‘Inexhaustible Dharma Lamp’. What is it? Just as a hundred thousand lamps can be lit from a single candle without its light growing dim, one bodhisattva can ignite bodhichitta in hundreds of thousands of sentient beings without in any way diminishing his own bodhichitta.”

This was Vimalakīrti’s way of telling the girls that they had no need to worry about sullyng their newly-discovered good qualities. By going back with Māra they would be of far greater benefit to sentient beings than by staying with Vimalakīrti.

Then he made his big move.

“Go back to the Land of Māra. Ignite the Lamp of Dharma, and by doing so, the Dharma will become inexhaustible in all the most unlikely places.”

What Vimalakīrti seems to be saying here is that instead of avoiding sleazy, sinful, materialistic and unholy places, a bodhisattva’s duty is to make visiting them a priority.

Jagatinadhara had witnessed all of this and Vimalakīrti’s supremacy had put him to shame.



“... which is why I don’t want to go to Vaiśālī,” he said to Lord Buddha, “I tremble at the thought of seeing Vimalakīrti again. Please don’t send me.”

## Suddata

The sūtras tell us that wealthy Indians loved making lavish offerings to their spiritual masters, like blanketing entire meadows with gold. Even today, well-to-do Indian families continue to uphold the tradition of making regular and generous offerings to monks, nuns and those who renounce worldly life to follow a spiritual path.

Suddata was a monk, a bodhisattva, the son of an extravagantly rich merchant, and Buddha’s next choice as emissary. Would Suddata visit Vaiśālī on his behalf? But the memory of Suddata’s own encounter with Vimalakīrti was still too fresh in his mind and he, too, begged to be excused. “Please, Lord Buddha, don’t make me go.”

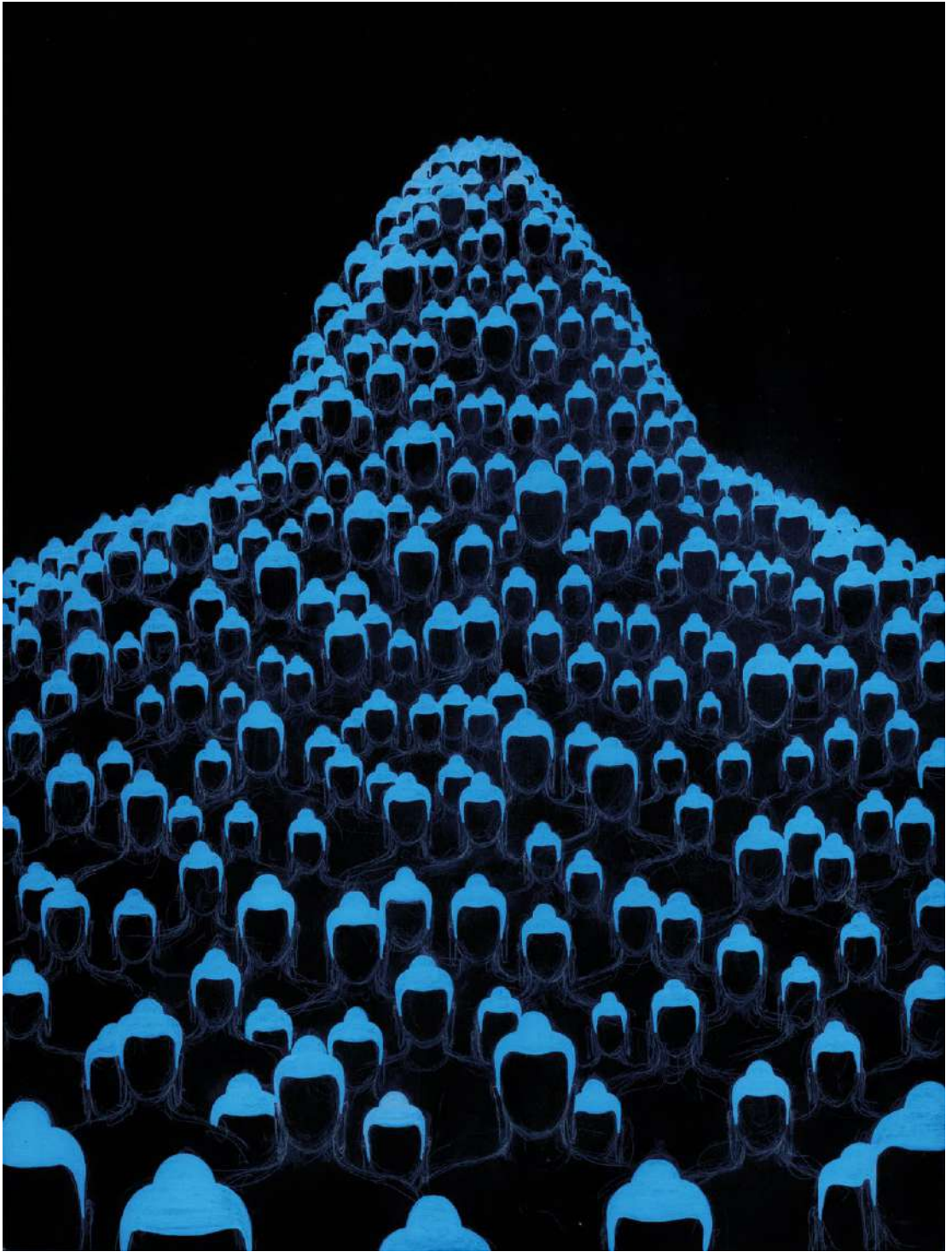
Suddata was making huge offerings to an enormous number of people, when suddenly, as if out of nowhere, Vimalakīrti appeared before him.

“What are you doing, Suddata!” exclaimed Vimalakīrti. “Do you really consider these meagre offerings to be somehow generous? Is this the full extent of your so-called generosity? It is? Well, it’s not genuine generosity, so what’s the point? What you should be offering these people is the ‘truth’ – that’s the supreme kind of generosity. You should also be offering love, compassion, joy, equanimity, and all that...”

Suddata was extremely impressed. I have a feeling he was particularly receptive, because we are told he was so moved by Vimalakīrti’s words that he gathered every piece of jewellery he owned – pearls, diamonds, gold, everything – and offered it all to Vimalakīrti. At first, Vimalakīrti wouldn’t accept any of it.

“Please accept what I offer,” said Suddata, “and do whatever you want to with it.”

Eventually, Vimalakīrti accepted all of it, then chose a priceless string of enormous pearls, cut it in two, and offered one half to the buddhas and the other half to the city’s most despised beggars. Having offered exactly the same number of pearls to both the buddhas and the beggars, he gave a long talk about fields of merit.



This is another very important teaching. We tend to imagine that ‘accumulating merit’ means making offerings to the buddhas and sublime beings. But here, Vimalakīrti states unmistakably that sentient beings are just as important a field of merit as the buddhas.

## Mañjuśrī

Buddha now turned to Mañjuśrī. Would he be Buddha’s emissary? Would he visit Vaiśālī to find out how Vimalakīrti was doing? And to everyone’s surprise, Mañjuśrī agreed at once.

“Vimalakīrti? Yes, I will go. That man is so accomplished!” He then went on to sing Vimalakīrti’s praises at some length.

Vimalakīrti is an exceptional being, said Mañjuśrī. He knows exactly how another person experiences their senses. He sees what they see, hears what they hear, tastes what they taste, and so on – which, if you think about it, is quite a big deal. The rest of us can only imagine what macaroni or chicken curry taste like in someone else’s mouth, even when that person is sitting right in front of us, and the taste we imagine is entirely based on the macaroni or chicken curries that we ourselves have tasted in the past. Vimalakīrti, on the other hand, could experience what the other person tasted through *their* senses, without any reference to his own.

That Mañjuśrī admired Vimalakīrti for such qualities was high praise indeed, and demonstrated that, far from being an ordinary businessman, Vimalakīrti was not only a sublime being, but an exceptionally accomplished one. People like us who claim we understand how other people feel can only base our projected understanding on what we ourselves experience. In other words, we never truly know what it’s like to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes; we merely slip into our own shoes then pretend they are the other person’s. Only a very accomplished being – like Vimalakīrti, or Mañjuśrī, for that matter – can taste as another tastes, see through another’s eyes, and smell as another smells, without having to rely on their own limited, incomplete, terms of reference.

It’s not difficult to imagine how thrilled and excited everyone in the mango grove felt when Mañjuśrī agreed to visit Vimalakīrti. Or how determined they were to follow him to Vaiśālī to witness what promised to be an immensely significant historic encounter – the kind of excitement

philosophers might feel at the prospect of Lao Tzu meeting Aristotle, or Karl Marx appearing on a talk show with Chuang Tzu.

The moment Mañjuśrī agreed to visit him, Vimalakīrti, who was still supposedly ill in bed, instantly knew he was on his way. He also knew that Mañjuśrī would be accompanied by a large and curious crowd.

“Mañjuśrī is coming,” thought Vimalakīrti, “So I must make my house empty.” Instantly, the people, furniture, carpets, sofas and chairs disappeared – another important detail – leaving the palace empty, except for the bed Vimalakīrti was lying on. It was like emptying all seven hundred and seventy-five rooms in Buckingham Palace, and leaving a single bed in the middle of one of the rooms with the Queen lying in it. As Vimalakīrti’s servants, attendants and bodyguards also disappeared with the furniture, there was no one to greet Mañjuśrī and his entourage when they arrived at the palace gates. All they found was a big, empty palace, and Vimalakīrti.

Mañjuśrī greeted Vimalakīrti politely then enquired after his health, asking all the usual questions. “How are you? When did you fall ill? What’s actually wrong with you?” And so on.

At first, this conversation about illness appears to be quite ordinary, yet Vimalakīrti’s startlingly brilliant responses make it philosophically groundbreaking.

“Do your doctors say when you will start to feel better?” asked Mañjuśrī.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get better,” said Vimalakīrti. “Because as long as there is desire and craving, there will be existence.”

Of course, people like you and me aren’t able to understand a single word these two illustrious bodhisattvas said that day. Our minds are too shallow, dull and prejudiced to fathom the profound depth and acuity of such great minds. But when Vimalakīrti said ‘existence’, he might have been referring to *saṃsāra* – which is everything that’s bound by time and space, direction and quantity. If we have a craving, that craving makes us project, and that projection is what we call ‘existence’. So-called ‘*saṃsāra*’ is therefore none other than existence itself. Descartes’ famous dictum, “I think, therefore I am” suggests something similar, but Vimalakīrti’s statement encompasses so much more. He seems to be saying that as long as there is desire, there will be *saṃsāric* existence; and as long as there are *saṃsāric* beings, I, Vimalakīrti, will remain ill. Or, while there is existence, there will also be *saṃsāra*; and while there is *saṃsāra*, we will continue to imagine there is compassion for *saṃsāric* beings.



Vimalakīrti went on to say, “When all sentient beings are free from all ailments...” – or when sentient beings are free from making distinctions, which is another way of describing absolute liberation – “...only then will I, Vimalakīrti, be free from the sickness of subject and object.”

What a thing to say! What a subject to discuss! And remember, he was responding to a question that was asked purely as a courtesy. Yet it triggered one of the most compelling teachings in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra.

“How did you catch this illness?”

“Compassion made me sick,” replied Vimalakīrti. “Bodhisattvas get sick because of compassion.”

Another sensational answer!

It was then that Mañjuśrī noticed the palace was completely empty.

“What’s happened? Why is your house empty? Where is everyone? Why don’t you have a nurse?”

“Buddhahelds are always empty,” replied Vimalakīrti.

“Empty of what?” asked Mañjuśrī.

“Empty of emptiness.”

“How can ‘emptiness’ be ‘empty’?”

“To be ‘empty of emptiness’ is to think ‘emptiness is emptiness’ and to be empty of that.”

It didn’t take Vimalakīrti long to get down to the nitty-gritty! Was he saying that to be ‘empty of emptiness’ is to be beyond making the distinction between ‘empty’ and ‘full’? To be empty of concepts? That’s what it sounds like to me.

“Where is emptiness?” asked Mañjuśrī.

“You will find it in the sixty-two wrong views<sup>2</sup>,” replied Vimalakīrti.

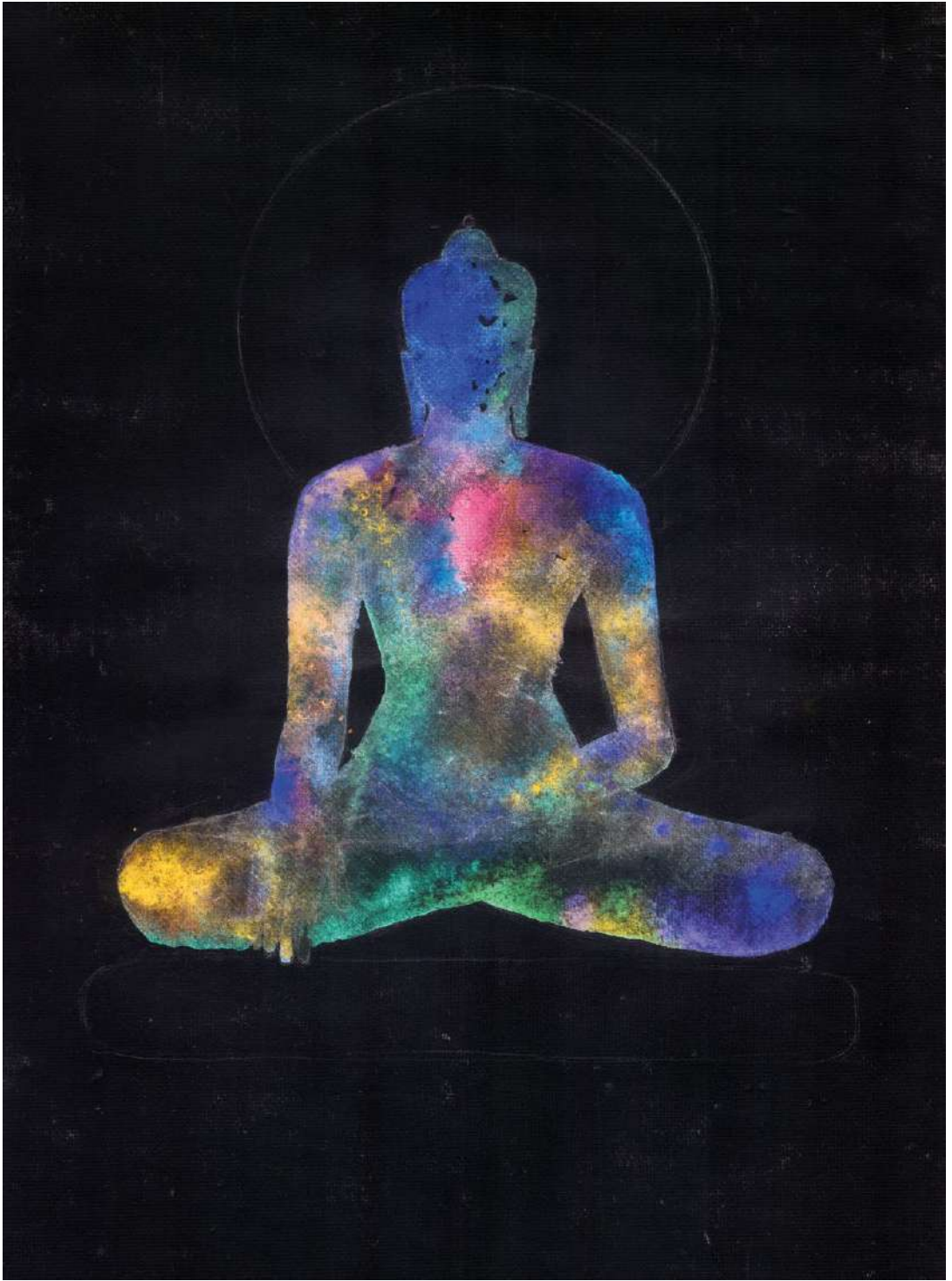
What a fantastic answer! And an excellent point. Many followers of the Buddha’s Dharma, especially of the Mahāyāna, would have expected the answer to ‘Where is emptiness?’ or ‘What is emptiness?’ to be ‘Emptiness is the ultimate teaching of the Buddha. Emptiness is found in the highest sūtras, like the Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra...’ and so on. But instead, Vimalakīrti said that emptiness is found not in right views, but in wrong views. We should all make a note of this.

“Where do these sixty-two wrong views come from?” asked Mañjuśrī.

Obviously, getting a handle on any part of this exchange is extremely difficult, let alone trying to describe what Vimalakīrti said next. Had I

---

2 Skt. *ḍṣṭtigata*. The sixty-two wrong views can be found in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*.

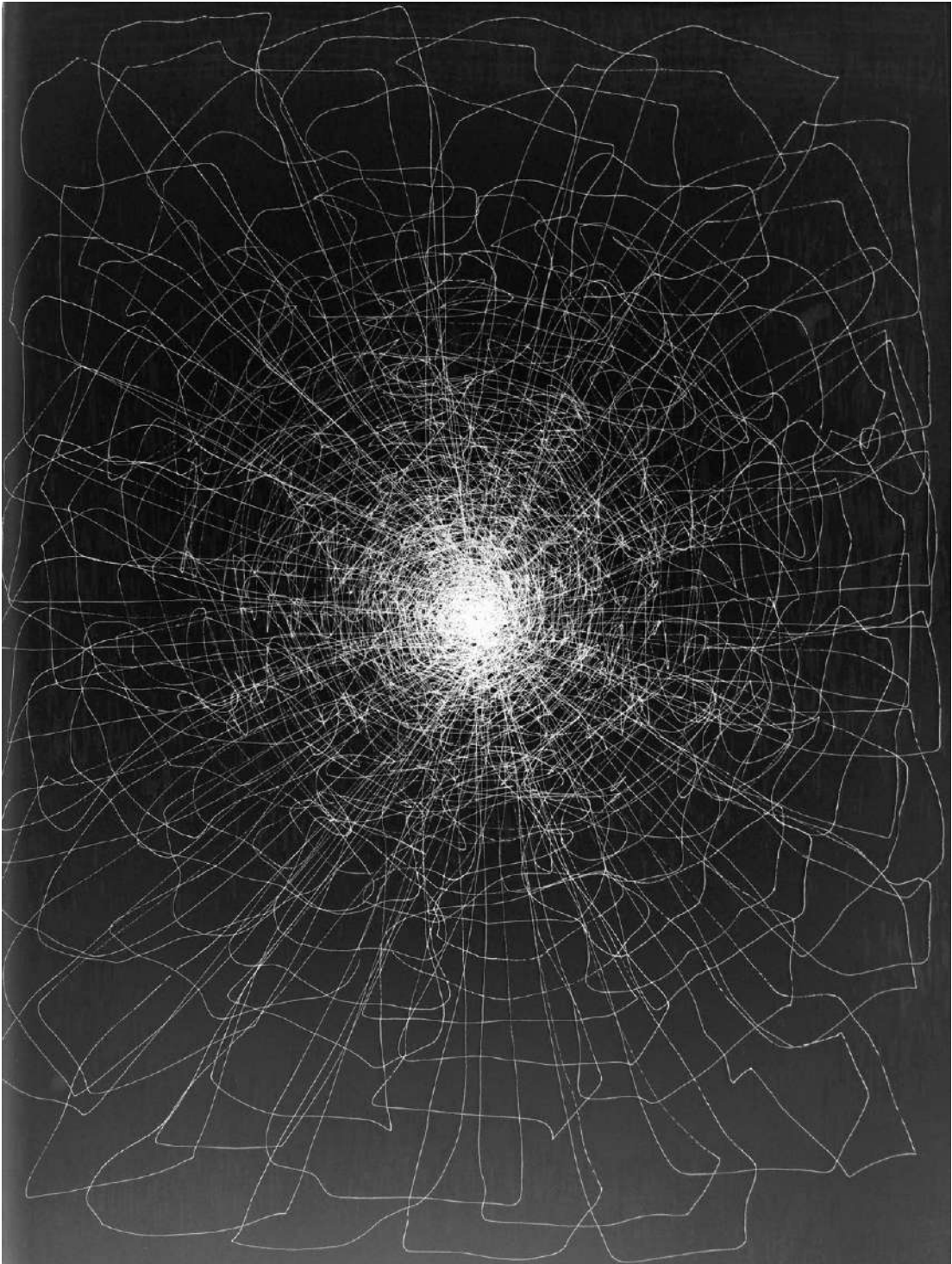


understood, even on an intellectual level, what Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti discuss in this sūtra, or the many other conversations about this subject that have been recorded, my perception of the saṃsāric world would be of little more than shadows. Or a bubble. Or a game of make-believe. Or a toy. But I haven't understood any of it, at any level. When people like you and me look, see, hear and taste, our experience is not of a bubble, or a dream, or a toy; our experience is tangible, concrete, solid and very fat.

“The sixty-two wrong views arise as a display, vibration, hue, or mood that reflects the quality of the Tathāgatagarbha, buddha nature,” replied Vimalakīrti.

A shocking statement at the best of times. But particularly scandalous to those of us who tend towards the puritanical, moralistic and dualistic, and whose strong habit is to judge right from wrong. People like us always expect wrong views to crawl out of filthy pits or smelly dungeons. But it looks as though Vimalakīrti is telling Mañjuśrī that the source of all wrong views is found in what we think of as the sublime. This statement of his has been quoted many times in Vajrayāna teachings. Even so, it's a notion that's virtually incomprehensible to dualistic beings like us. It's like being told that the source of darkness is light. But thinking about it, aren't dark and light a natural juxtaposition? Doesn't darkness only exist when compared with light, and vice versa? There cannot only be darkness, can there? Nor can there only be light. If darkness and shadows were not born from light, or light born from shadow, how would photographers be able to work their magic?

At the same time, I have a feeling this conversation isn't merely about the dependent arising of light and shadow – which itself is mystifying, especially when you first hear about it. No, this conversation is about much more than that. It's like digging something up, believing it's a rock, then discovering it's actually a diamond. I've been told that the Koh-i-Noor diamond wasn't cut and polished until quite late in its history, yet it was always a diamond. If you had seen it before it was cut and thought it was just another ugly rock, that would be a wrong view. Now that it has been cut, it's easy to recognize – it's one of the most famous diamonds in the world – to this day, India and Pakistan whine about how the British stole it from the Sikhs in the 19th century. But the point here is that whatever it looked like before it was cut and polished, it was still the famous Koh-i-Noor diamond, and that it was a diamond long before it was ever called the Koh-i-Noor. So, to have assumed it was just a lump of rock would have been a wrong view.



“Where are your attendants?” asked Mañjuśrī. “Why isn’t there anyone here to help you?”

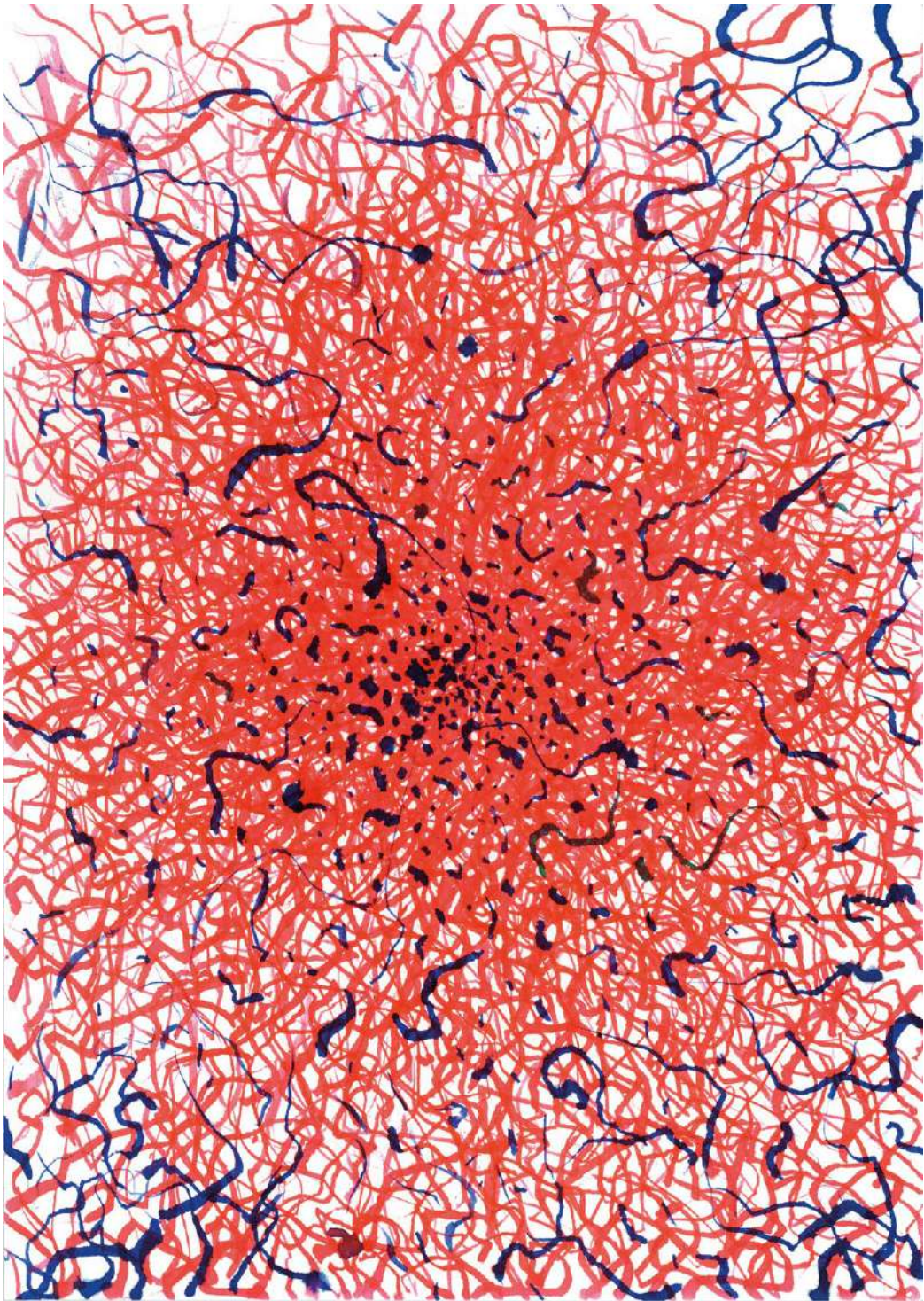
“Demons and those who disturb me are my attendants,” replied Vimalakīrti.

Remember, Vimalakīrti’s illness and its symptoms are important details because this entire conversation was triggered by a commotion in a mango grove about who would visit a man who was supposed to be ill.

Again, it’s a struggle to make sense of the profound insights these two superlative bodhisattvas continue to come up with, but it seems to me they come to the conclusion that to be ill is to believe in a self. You are ill if you cling to the idea of a self, and you are ill if you imagine that self is true, present and alive. ‘Self’ is, of course, a reference; but as strong and stubborn as this reference may first appear, the more closely you scrutinize it, the less distinct it becomes. Nevertheless, our constant reference to self is the source of all our other references, and having established a self, many other designations spill out – others, mine, theirs, good, bad, ugly, right, wrong, giver, receiver, victim, predator, heaven, earth, hell, saṃsāra, nirvāṇa, moral, immoral, men, women – each and every one of which we try desperately to cling to. Some we grab at because we think they are good, others we try to push aside or eliminate completely because they look bad or dangerous or untrustworthy. By examining everything in order to judge whether it’s worthy or unworthy of us, we end up clinging to both the good and the bad ever more tightly.

From the point of view of these two bodhisattvas, our tendency to cling is what illness really is. We are only healthy, well and strong when we have no points of reference. Although we want to cure our illnesses by applying the remedy of a spiritual path – meaning the practices of generosity, patience, one-pointed concentration, and so on – because that path has the goal of enlightenment, it’s just another form of illness. So, as far as Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti are concerned, whatever we practise on that path – even meditation – is also a sickness.

They go deeper still by saying that if we think we have something that needs extracting, deleting, or purifying – like desire, anger or jealousy – the very fact we think we have to get rid of it, is itself an illness. As is imagining there is something we should adopt, achieve, acquire or accumulate, like nirvāṇa or enlightenment. Or the subjective and objective compassion of believing there is a self that feels compassion and sentient beings to feel compassion for.



Basically *everything* is a disease or an affliction. A reference, a movement and a stream of thought are all illnesses because they turn us away from the truth. Imagining there is such a thing as an ailment is also an illness; and so is the idea that there is a remedy or a cure. Which makes longing for liberation an illness, because it's the result of believing that you are bound to saṃsāra and that whatever binds you is holding you back from liberation.

All our references are illnesses; they are like viruses, 'ailment viruses'. But of all the ailments that exist in saṃsāra, two require our particular attention: reference to 'liberation' and reference to 'bondage'.

## **Liberation and Bondage**

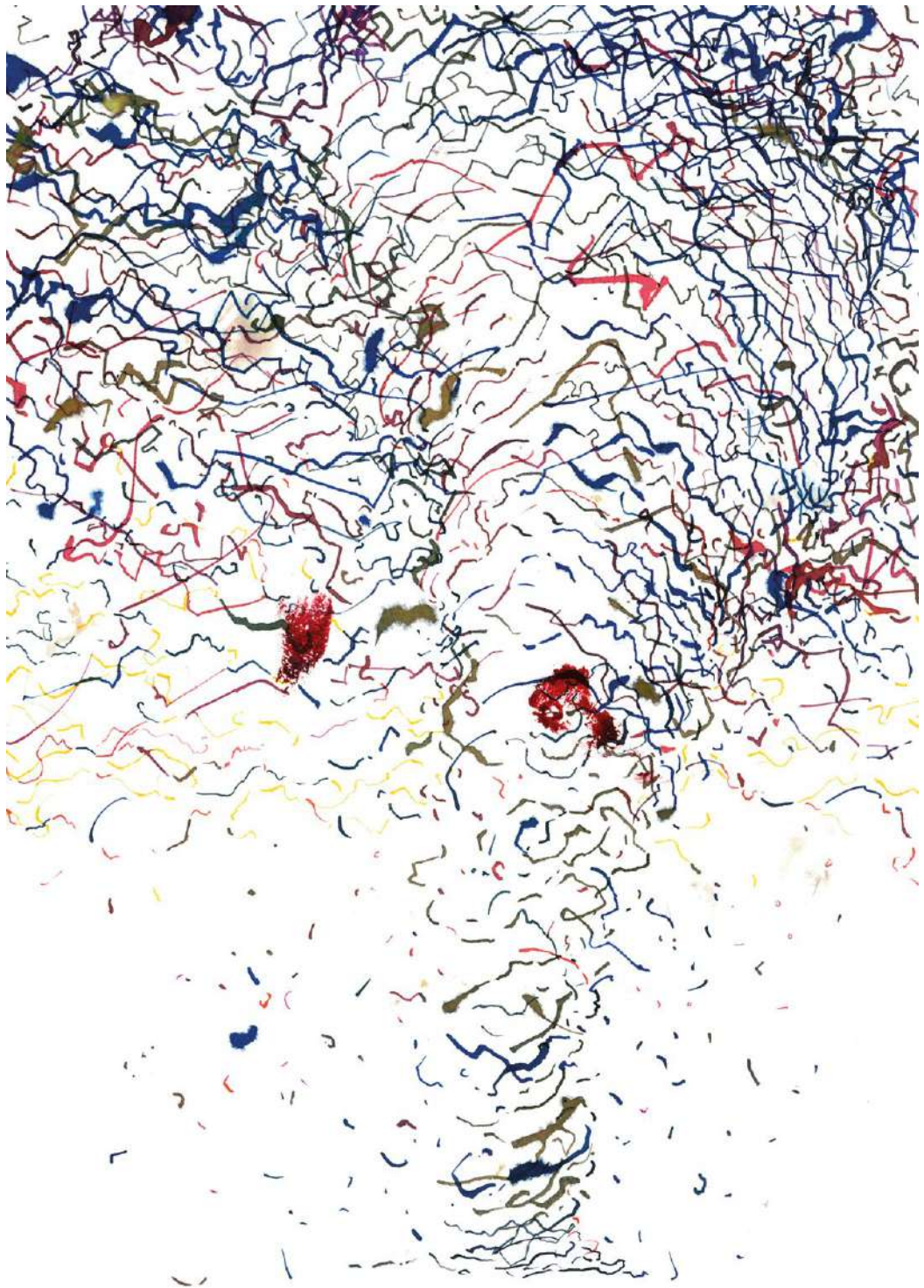
What do we mean by 'liberation' and 'bondage'? One of the fundamental teachings in the Mahāyāna is that the ground is emptiness, the path has no characteristics, and the result is beyond aspiration. Based on that teaching, if a bodhisattva believes in liberation and thinks she can aspire for that liberation, her belief in a result is a form of bondage. But if that bodhisattva then enters saṃsāra armed with skilful methods like compassion motivated by the wish to liberate sentient beings, the result is liberation. This is what Vimalakīrti meant when he said that if a bodhisattva's meditation is undistracted but lacks wisdom, it is 'bondage'.

So, a bodhisattva is ill if she meditates; and if her meditation is free from distraction but lacks wisdom, she gets worse – in fact, that's when the bodhisattva gets really sick. Similarly, the kind of undistracted, one-pointed, calm abiding that modern vipassana practitioners so cherish is also a fundamental sickness.

A bodhisattva will only be free from sickness if she can taste the flavour of her meditation – for instance through the practice of calm abiding. But rather than settle for a state of calm abiding, if she knows the skilful methods necessary to transcend and undo calm abiding – to go beyond being burdened with the ability to concentrate – then the bodhisattva will be liberated.

If a bodhisattva has wisdom, but that wisdom is devoid of any skilful methods – in other words, if her wisdom lacks compassion – it is a sickness. But she will be liberated if her wisdom is accompanied by skilful methods.

How does a bodhisattva become bound up, constrained or enslaved by skilful methods that lack wisdom? What causes that kind of bondage?



Vimalakīrti says that all the views, emotions, propensities and virtuous deeds that have not been dedicated towards the enlightenment of all sentient beings will bind a bodhisattva. How does a bodhisattva attain liberation using skilful methods accompanied by wisdom? By dedicating everything towards the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

What a great way to practise non-attachment! It goes without saying that we must aim at having no attachment to possessions, fame, family or even our own self. Yet Vimalakīrti seems to be indicating that there is something beyond all that. Having no attachment to the path, he says, will liberate you from all other forms of bondage. Wow! But isn't it only possible to develop that kind of ability once you are already quite a powerful and mature spiritual practitioner? Well, no. Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī suggest quite the opposite. Even someone as ordinary as I am, can and should start to practise feeling no attachment for either the path or the result. And we should all get into the habit of always dedicating our practice towards the enlightenment of all sentient beings.

Imagine you were given the opportunity to witness a conversation between Plato and Lao Tzu; imagine that, as a philosopher, you had the ability to appreciate their insights and were extremely eager to learn from them. Once it was all over, wouldn't you want to boast about your experience and show off what you had learned? Wouldn't you commit to memory as much as you could of what those two thinkers had said about human rights, fate, predestination, free will, and so on? That's how I feel about this conversation between Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī. The difference is, though, that what they talked about was so much more profound than mere ontology.

Actually, what I should do is simply read and contemplate the conversations presented in this sūtra. That alone would do me a great deal of good. Even better would be if I didn't contemplate them at all, but just read their words with a completely open mind, without making any assumptions or harbouring any expectations. If I could just leap into the text, without a moment's hesitation and with wholehearted devotion, I would quickly be liberated from the burden of confidence and doubt. I could reap even more benefit by simply putting the text of the Vimalakīrti Sūtra on a high shelf in my room, offering candles, flowers, incense and food, then venerating it as the most profound conversation ever to have taken place on this earth. Doing that would elevate my understanding of this text to an entirely different level. But look at me! I am torn between wanting to increase my knowledge

and make extensive notes on the one hand, and on the other, wanting to brag about these two spiritual giants and impress you with quotations from their conversations – that’s why I am writing this preface. At the same time, my own inability to make head or tail of even a fraction of their discussion is deeply humbling.

## Śāriputra

As Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī talked, Śāriputra examined the empty room.

“There aren’t any chairs here. Not even mats,” he thought. “These great bodhisattvas, arhats and dignitaries have walked all the way to Vaiśālī to visit this merchant, but there’s nowhere for them to sit. Where are all his chairs?”

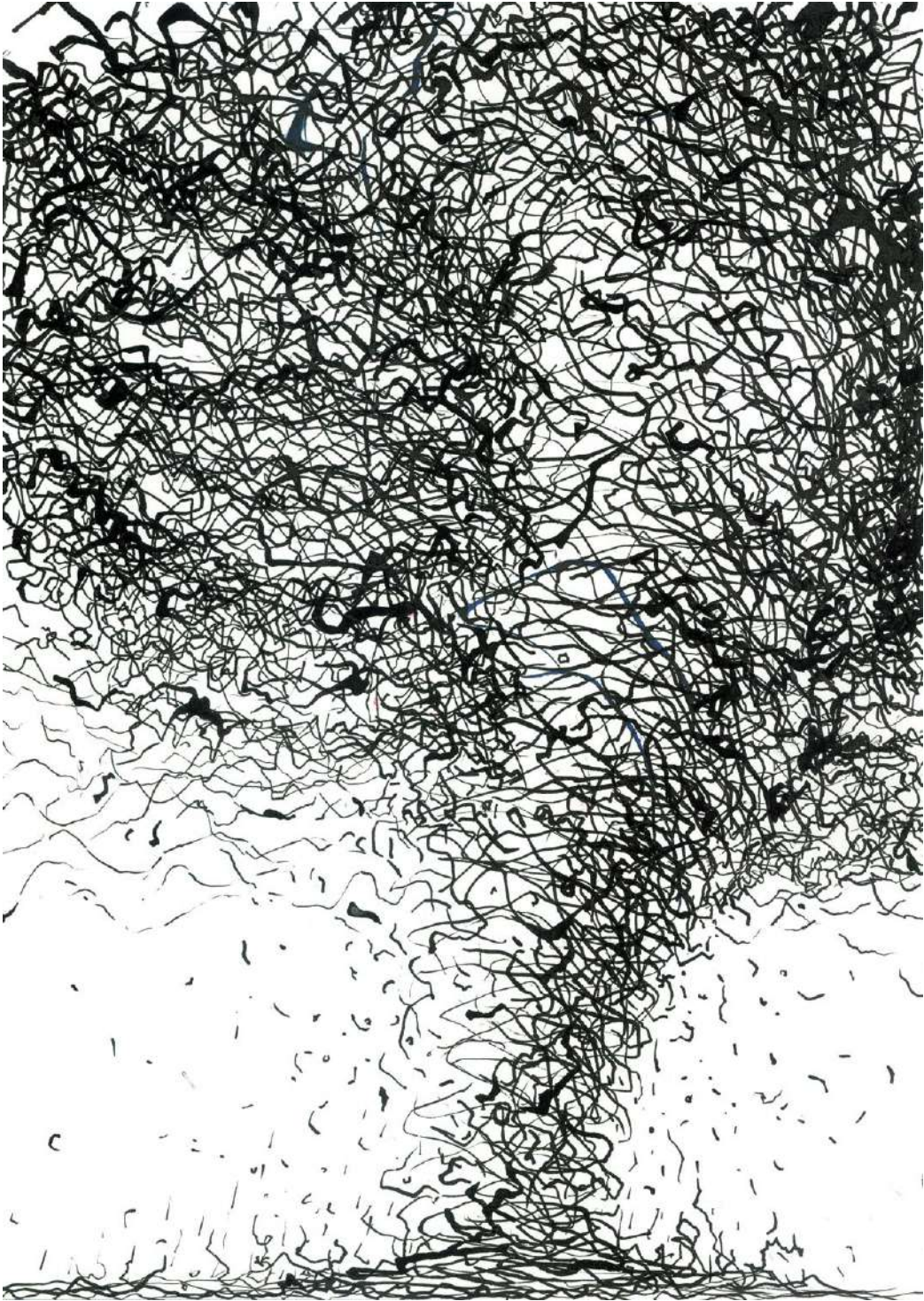
Instantly reading his mind, Vimalakīrti said, “Hey Śāriputra, did you come here for the Dharma, or to sit in a chair?”

In all honesty, Śāriputra couldn’t care less about where he sat. But as the discussion that followed about ‘seats’ and the desire to sit is such an important one, the Buddha’s blessings must, once again, have put the thought into Śāriputra’s mind – these incomparable beings didn’t waste their time on trivia. Chairs or seats of any kind are about longing to make a home somewhere, to dwell or to nest; they are about taking the weight off your feet, occupying territory, being idle and not moving. All of which is significant because the discussion now touches on the subject of ‘ālaya’.

When we behave badly, if we don’t redeem ourselves, we suffer consequences; when we behave well, we reap benefits. But until either result manifests, where does the power of those causes and conditions go? Where is it stored? Where does it dwell? Where is its ‘seat’? It must be somewhere.

In this conversation, a ‘seat’ represents references, bases or foundations, and what carries over from one life to the next. Basically, it’s about the continuity of karma.

These days, even science has noticed that a thief who was sentenced to a jail term last year is, at the cellular level, a completely different being one year later. Yet in the relative world we continue to believe in continuity, and that cause, condition and effect are carried forward. Many, many commentaries have been written on this subject. In this conversation between Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī, we discover that Buddhism teaches there is no such thing as a true and permanent, independently existing soul that takes you into the



next life, or heaven, or enlightenment; neither is there such a thing as a truly existing ground.

Vimalakīrti's response to Śāriputra's question about where they should sit is witheringly sarcastic, "Those who long for a seat to sit in are not looking for Dharma." To wish for a seat, he said, means you are looking for a foundation, a reference, a dogma, a system. It means you want to nest.

I get the feeling that Vimalakīrti equated the way we deluded beings interact with the world – how we judge, talk, think about and value things – with the way cow dung drops to the ground. Once it hits the earth, shit doesn't move; similarly, once we get stuck with an idea, it becomes so entrenched as to be virtually engraved on our minds. When Śāriputra asked for somewhere to sit, Vimalakīrti seized the opportunity to explain that wanting a seat indicates a longing for somewhere to settle down. If you want to settle down, he said, you are not looking for the truth – for Dharma. The only way you can find the truth is by constantly having the rug pulled out from under your feet, and that means there is no time for settling. In effect, it means there is no such thing as longing to be settled, no sitting and no seat – which is where things start to get complicated.

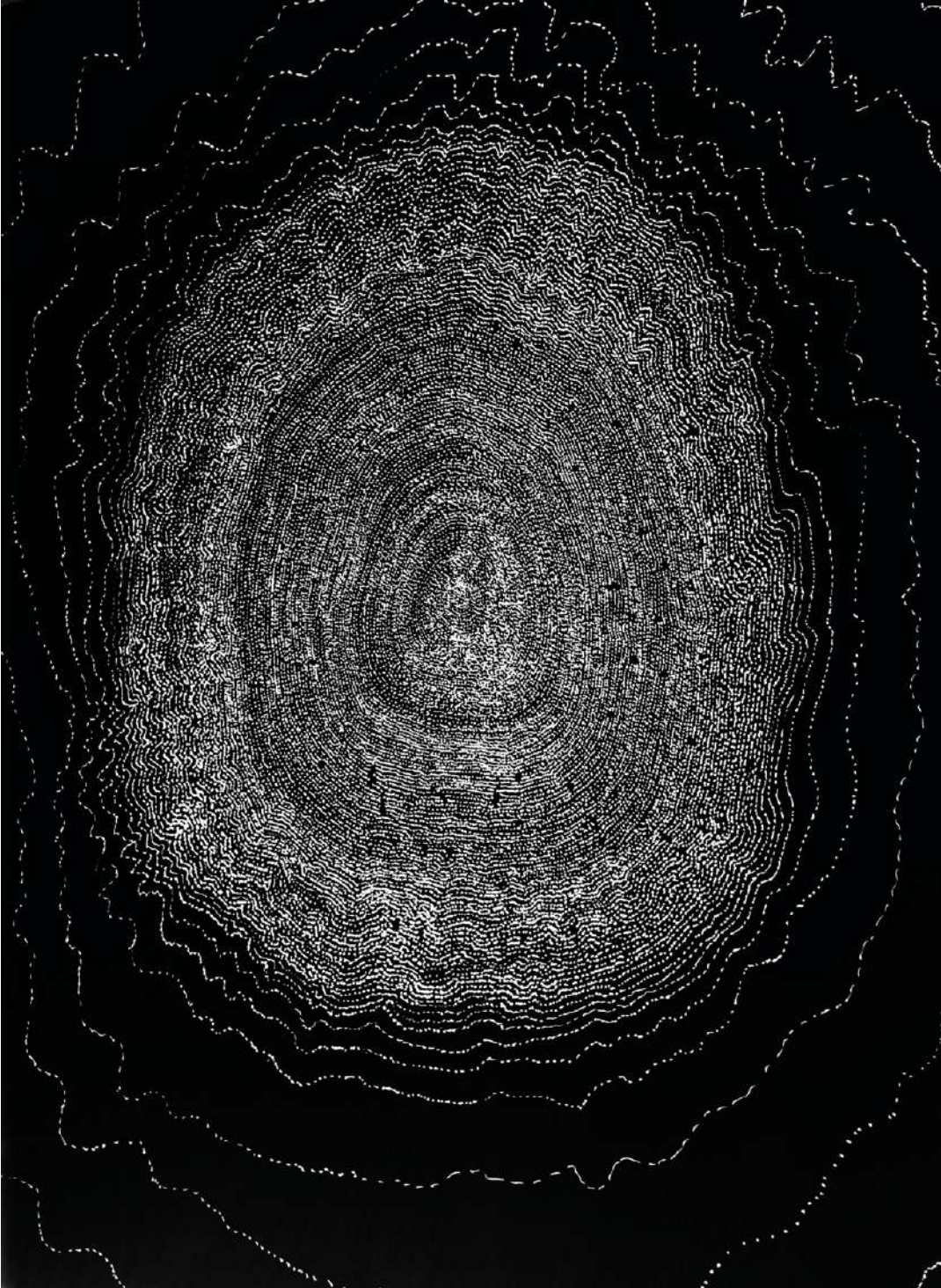
"But I do want Dharma," insisted Śāriputra. "I'm not just looking for somewhere to sit – of course I'm not! I only mention it because I am a guest in your home, and as you are my host it's only natural for me to bring up the fact that there are no chairs or mats for us to sit on. It doesn't mean I'm not here for the Dharma."

"But Śāriputra, if you desire Buddha, or Dharma, or Saṅgha," retorted Vimalakīrti, "You don't desire the truth. What you're looking for is somewhere to settle. And in your case, you want to settle down in the three great seats of Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha. If you were looking for the truth, you wouldn't be willing to settle for merely understanding the truth of suffering, or the ability to abandon the causes of suffering."

These are pretty big statements! If you genuinely want the absolute truth, you will not settle for the cessation of suffering. And if you genuinely want to understand the truth, you will not settle for practising the path. Wow! Vimalakīrti is really tough! But however contradictory his statements may appear to be at first glance, actually, they are not.

"No matter where you wish to settle, or what kind of 'settling' you are searching for, it's not the truth – even if you settle for enlightenment. You are like a fly. Flies love to settle on shit, or anything that stinks. Enlightenment





has a very strong smell and so you are attracted to it. But all you really want to do is land on enlightenment and settle down into it. You want to glue your four limbs to enlightenment so you can stay there forever. That is the kind of ‘settling’ you are looking for! You are not looking for the truth. Therefore Śāriputra, if you really want the Dharma, you must first learn how not to want it.”

Vimalakīrti’s refutation of Śāriputra’s insistence that he does want Dharma by exposing what ‘wanting the Dharma’ really means, is long and again, often sarcastic. But once he had said all he wanted to say, Vimalakīrti miraculously summoned enough of the most beautiful thrones in existence for every one of the Buddha’s great disciples to have somewhere to sit. But there was a catch: the thrones were gigantic and impossibly high.

## Think the Unthinkable

As philosophers, we must learn to interpret accurately and to mean what we say. For example, what do you mean when you say, ‘incredible’ or ‘unthinkable’? Whatever it is, it’s too vague. The only way to understand something fully is to be able to think the unthinkable and, at the same time, let the unthinkable remain unthinkable. If you can do that, you are improving. Right now most of us cannot think the unthinkable. The few who can, quickly discover that being able to think the unthinkable means that the unthinkable is no longer unthinkable, it’s a ‘thinkable unthinkable’. So, bodhisattvas must be able to think the unthinkable while allowing the quality and the taste of ‘unthinkable’ to remain.

Like the frog that lives in a well and has no desire to see the world outside, we need the courage to step out of our tiny worlds to get the hang of these ideas. I am not suggesting you manufacture a kind of gullibility for yourself; thinking the unthinkable isn’t about gullibility, it’s about ‘immeasurable mind’. What we have to learn is how not to shun the unthinkable automatically, and to accept that the impossible is possible. But how? By learning that impossible and possible are equal; and that possible is as absurd as impossible.

This section of the Vimalakīrti Sūtra is full of similar explanations that form a thorough study of the incredible, the unthinkable and the inconceivable – if I were to give it a title, it would be something like, ‘Explaining the Doings’, or ‘The Ins and Outs of Incredibility’. If you have the time, you should read it.

Practically speaking, we find it hard to think the unthinkable because we don't know how, and we can only talk about the unthinkable if we imagine it's somehow credible. So, are we wasting our time? Vimalakīrti says no, we are not. Not at all. If you bite off a piece of the sky, it's not wrong to say that you have bitten the sky; if you swim at Copacabana Beach, it's not wrong to say that you have swum in the ocean. And that is how we begin.

None of those who followed Mañjuśrī to Vaiśālī that day were ordinary beings. Some were great bodhisattvas who had completely crushed mountains of dualistic thoughts, habits and grasping, and had therefore freed themselves from the need to discern size, shape, height, colour, right and wrong.

At this point, having summoned thrones for them to sit on, Vimalakīrti told the arhats and bodhisattvas that it was up to each individual to work out how to climb into their throne; and once up there, they would also have to discover for themselves how to feel genuinely at ease.

The bodhisattvas jumped onto their thrones without any trouble at all. But for some reason the arhats just couldn't. Even the great Śāriputra couldn't hold in his mind the idea that a stupendously vast throne was also exactly the right size for his own comparatively tiny body. It would be like you or I lying in a bed the size of a football stadium. Would we be comfortable? No, because our minds simply could not cope with the apparent contradiction or how to handle it. And neither could the arhats.

“Prostrate to the Buddha Merupradīparāja, the King of Illumination,” said Vimalakīrti to Śāriputra. “If you do, you will accumulate enough merit to get past this awkwardness.”

On the face of it, the most obvious interpretation of what Vimalakīrti is saying is that there is an individual called Merupradīparāja, that he is a mighty, truly existing god-like Buddha, and that he can grant all our wishes, including the ability to sit on and feel comfortable in a throne as high as a mountain and as wide as a football stadium. But I'm not sure that is what Vimalakīrti meant here. Is there another interpretation? Yes, but it requires us to go beyond our petty, theistic minds.

I think Vimalakīrti might have been suggesting that to prostrate to Buddha Merupradīparāja isn't just a way of showing respect to an outer Buddha, it is a state of realization. By entering into that state of realization, the arhats could shrug off what remained of their dualistic habit of making

distinctions. Once that had gone, it would be much easier for them to cope with the awkwardness of ordinary-sized human bodies sitting in vast thrones.

But why all the drama? Why go through all this rigmarole just so the arhats could sit comfortably on thrones? And why would the arhats accept the burden of praying to a buddha just to sit on a throne – which essentially is what Vimalakīrti was telling the arhats to do. What this story does is lead us to the realization that through devotion and the accomplishment of Buddha Merupradīparāja, it is possible for a practitioner to transcend the awkwardness of having to make distinctions between large and small; and that devotion to the Buddha Merupradīparāja is none other than devotion to absolute non-duality.

## Mañjuśrī

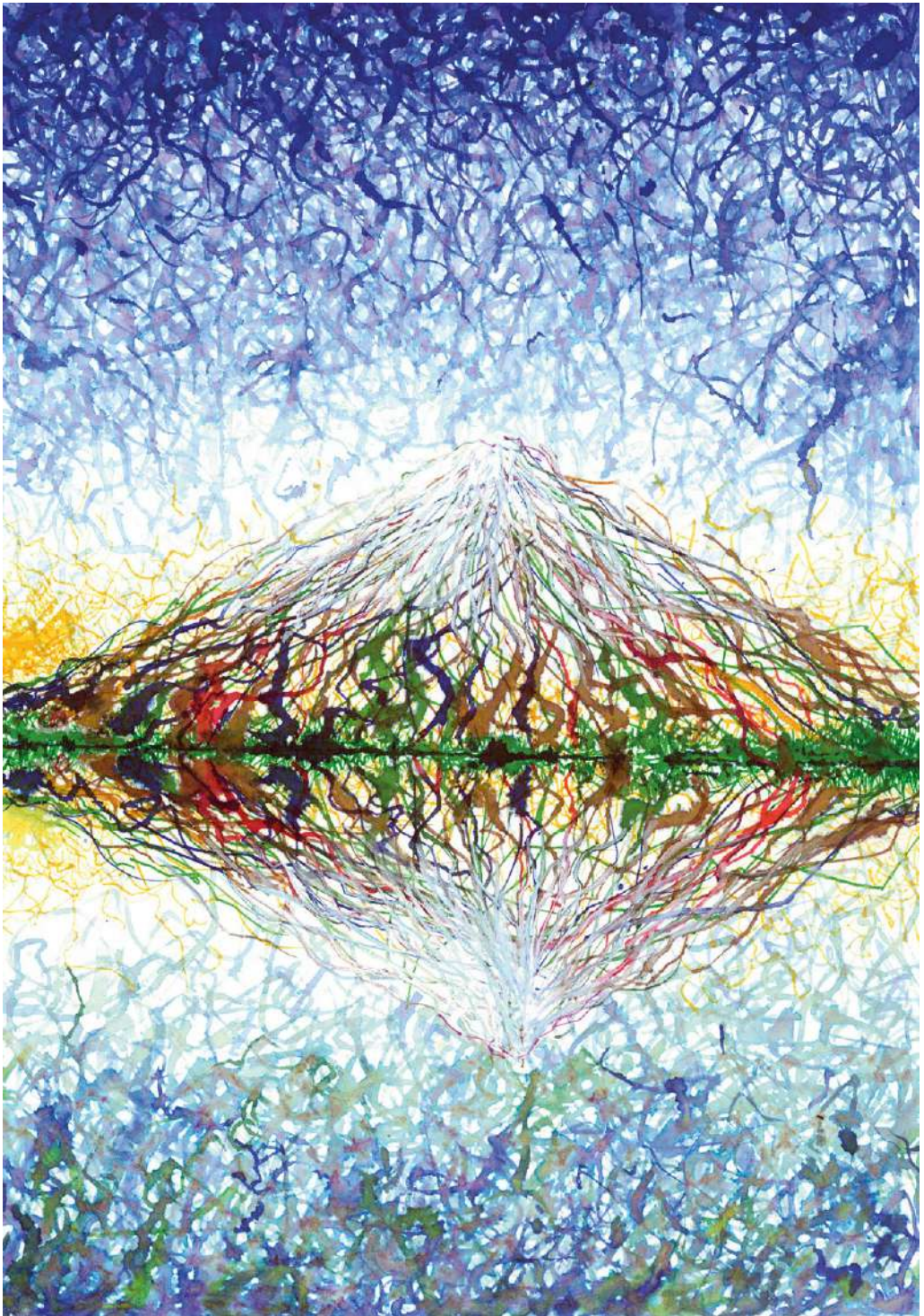
Mañjuśrī starts the next conversation with a question.

“Vimalakīrti, how should a bodhisattva look at a sentient being?”

“A bodhisattva should look at a sentient being in the same way a wise person looks at the reflection of the moon in water.”

Why should a bodhisattva see a sentient being as a reflection? We usually assume that a reflection is just a reflection, that it doesn't really exist. Yet, although a reflection doesn't truly exist, it's impossible to deny that we can see the moon reflected on the surface of still water. And when the moon isn't obscured by clouds or the water muddy, because clarity and emptiness arise at the same time, the moon's reflection is as complete, perfect, clear and 'there' as the moon in the sky. So, what Vimalakīrti seems to be saying is, if you believe a truly existing sentient being is out there somewhere, and that bodhisattvas can practise generating compassion for that being, you are effectively asserting that: the person truly exists; their problems and sufferings exist independently; the diagnosis of their problems is not subjective or fabricated; and the solution is not fabricated, it truly exists.

Imagine a doctor who specializes in the workings of the mind. His idea of normal is based on the books he read while studying for his Ph.D. and, as a result, that kind of normal has become his goal. When he examines you, if you don't conform to his idea of normal, his diagnosis will be that you need help. The help he then gives you will be aimed at reshaping your mind so



it looks like his kind of normal. Actually, though, you are and always have been far more normal than he ever was.

That's not all. When you try to help someone, simply because you believe there is a problem, an object of that problem, a diagnosis of the problem and a solution, you will end up becoming the victim of your own compassion, sorrow and concern. The Californians have a word for it: codependency. For example, a woman tries to help her alcoholic husband, but in the process becomes ensnared in the problem of how to help, what help really is, not being able to help, and so on. What Vimalakīrti is suggesting here is that a bodhisattva should look at the person they are trying to help in the same way we look at the moon's reflection in water.

He has other suggestions too.

"A bodhisattva should look at a sentient being in the same way a magician looks at the magical display he just conjured.

"A bodhisattva should look at a sentient being in the same way you look at your own face in a mirror." Like a mirage.

How should a bodhisattva look at a sentient being who practises, accomplishes the practice and purifies defilements? In other words, how should a bodhisattva view a practitioner who is making progress?

"Look at the practitioner in the same way you look at the trail left by a bird flying in the sky." Of course, a flying bird leaves no trail. Therefore, according to Vimalakīrti, there is no progress; nothing is abandoned and nothing is achieved. All you can do is think that a bird flew from here to there. This is how a bodhisattva should view a practitioner's progress.

Most of us have hardly made any worthwhile progress on our spiritual path. In fact, very few of us have achieved anything at all. But how would you feel if your teacher told you directly that the little you imagine you have achieved is nothing more than the trail a bird leaves behind it as it flies in the sky? Would you be encouraged? Or, disheartened? I suspect the latter.

"So," said Mañjuśrī to Vimalakīrti, "if a bodhisattva sees sentient beings as mirages and reflections, and so on, how can that bodhisattva then generate love for those very same sentient beings?"

"When a bodhisattva sees a sentient being as a mirage, a reflection, or the trail left by a flying bird," replied Vimalakīrti, "there is no trace of assumption, expectation or judgement in his view. The way he sees the sentient being is not deceptive. As he is not deceived by his own view of sentient beings, there is no deception at all. Isn't that love?"



Vimalakīrti goes on to describe various kinds of love: protective love, pacifying love, painless love, innate love, love that isn't contradictory, non-dual love, unmoving or imperturbable love, stable love, pure love, love that defeats enemies, natural love, Buddha's love, bodhi's love, generous love, disciplined love, patient love, diligent love, sincere love, wisdom love, skilful love, love that isn't hypocritical, love that doesn't deceive, love that has no price tag, blissful love, etc. Then he describes compassion, joy and equanimity, all of which are achieved when the bodhisattva knows that sentient beings are like the reflections of the moon in water.

## The Goddess

Meanwhile, a goddess had been eavesdropping on their conversation. She was so impressed by this remarkable outpouring of Dharma that, as she rejoiced wholeheartedly at all she heard, she scattered flower buds and petals all over the arhats and bodhisattvas as an expression of her devotion. The flowers that landed on the bodhisattvas slid gracefully to the floor, but those that landed on the arhats stuck fast. As it was considered unseemly for colourful flowers to appear to adorn the austere robes of a renunciant, the arhats tried to shake them off. But they would not budge. Some arhats even resorted to magic to try to remove them, but the goddess's flowers stayed right where they were.

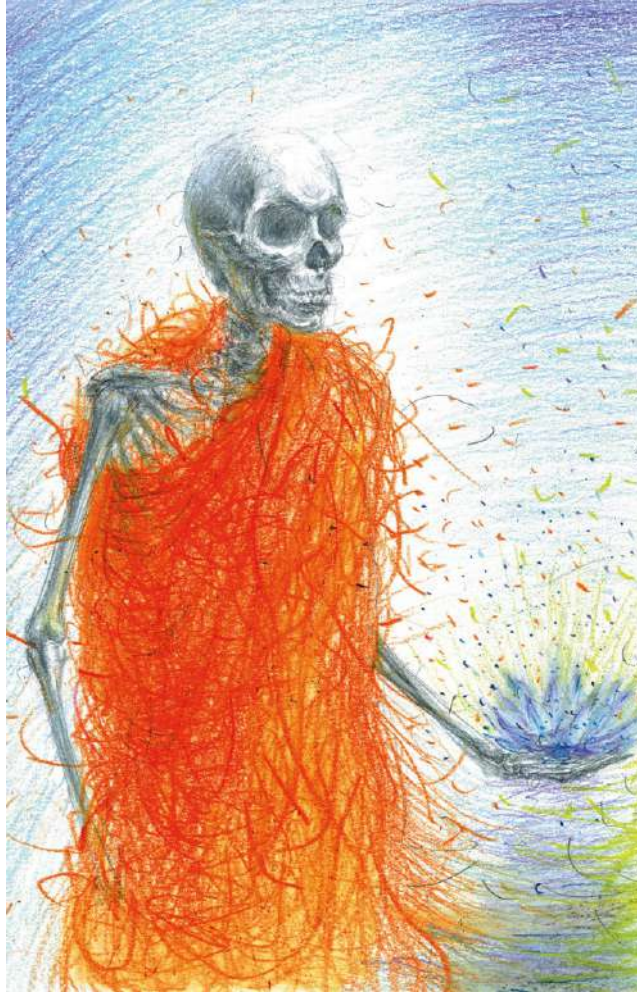
Similar stories exist in the Zen tradition. Like the one about two monks who were about to cross a river when a girl, who also wanted to get across, asked for their help. The older monk immediately picked her up, carried her across the water and set her down on the opposite bank. Later, the younger monk said, "You are a monk, yet you agreed to carry a female across the river. How could you do that?"

The older monk replied, "I left that girl behind us on the riverbank, but you are still carrying her."

The same principle and wisdom apply to the sticky flowers. For the arhats, the flowers were a kind of stain, whereas for the bodhisattvas, they weren't.

Once again, Śāriputra is challenged, this time not by Vimalakīrti, but by the goddess. And this is where the Vimalakīrti Sūtra becomes even bolder.

"Isn't 'liberation' to be free from anger, desire and ignorance?" asked Śāriputra. "Isn't that liberation?"



“Such teachings are only given to those bloated with pride,” replied the goddess. “Those who are not proud already know that there is no such thing as anger, desire and ignorance and that there is therefore nothing for them to shrug off.”

This exchange was disconcerting for Buddha’s Śrāvakayāna monk disciples, who were bound by the discipline of the Vinaya and therefore tended to avoid women. It may also have made some of the followers of the Mahāyāna a little uneasy, but it was far worse for the monks. For a woman to have the audacity even to discuss such teachings with a perfect, pure and highly accomplished monk was almost intolerable. Nevertheless, Śāriputra’s conversation with the goddess continued.

“What went wrong?” asked Śāriputra. “What happened to you?”

“What do you mean?” replied the goddess.



“Well, you’re a woman!” said Śāriputra. “What did you do in a past life that caused you to be reborn as a woman in this one?”

“What are you talking about?” said the goddess, irritated. “I’ve been living in this house for twelve years and I’ve never even seen a woman!”

So-called ‘man’, ‘woman’ and ‘gender’, she said, are as non-existent as a magician’s magic. Or a reflection of the moon in water, which may look clear and complete, but has no inherently existing nature. She then goes on and on about how wrong it is to think in terms of gender, and cannot understand why Śāriputra is so obsessed by it. To make her point, she magically changes places with Śāriputra. In an instant, he finds himself in her body, and she in his.

“Is anything wrong?” she asked.

“Well, I certainly look very strange!” replied Śāriputra. “But apart from that, being a woman isn’t much different to being a man!”

They now talk about how appearances are deceptive.

“What makes you think I am a man? Because you saw me in a man’s body for a few decades? Is that your only reason? If it is, it’s a pathetic reason.” And the same argument is applied to why we think a woman is a woman.

Eventually they both have another magical sex-change and return to their previous forms.

“So, where is your female form now?” asked the goddess.

“It is no more,” replied Śāriputra, and they discuss what is meant by ‘no more’. As there is no such thing as truly existing gender, they said, how can it change once, let alone twice.

This conversation about gender equality took place near the beautiful and remote north Indian city of Vaiśālī, in the presence of perhaps the most significant and consequential spiritual practitioners alive at that time. And it happened more than two thousand five hundred years ago, centuries before the Christian and Islamic religions were founded, and more than two millennia before the French writer Olympe de Gouges published her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen* in 1791 and the English philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft added her feminist voice with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792.

## Mañjuśrī

These days, people put a great deal of effort and money into fulfilling their dreams. Some save for months just to fly to Chicago to attend one of Oprah Winfrey’s live talk shows, or to visit England to watch Liverpool F.C. play at Anfield. The people who lived during Buddha’s lifetime had quite different dreams. They would dream about having the opportunity to witness conversations like those that took place between Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti, which we can now read in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra.

Don’t forget, not only were these conversations inspired by the Buddha himself, but the audience included Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, Kāśyapa, several kings and queens, fabulously rich merchants, warlords, everyone of consequence, and many ordinary Vaiśālī citizens. They would all have been hanging on every word, not daring to so much as clear their throats, so eager were they to catch every syllable these two great bodhisattvas uttered.

## What Makes a Buddha?

Having examined many profound subjects, Vimalakīrti asked two very significant questions. The first was “What makes a buddha?” meaning, what ingredients or components go into making a buddha? It’s a bit like asking “What is the recipe for Korean ‘kimchi’?” And the second question was, “To which family or caste does a buddha belong?”

Today, it’s not easy for us to understand these questions, but back then they were considered extremely relevant. Historically, certain jobs were always given to those born into specific families and social backgrounds. Until very recently, for instance, the highest political and social jobs in England were given almost exclusively to men who had been educated in public schools like Harrow and Eton; and the Prince of Wales is always expected to become the next King of England. The same can also be said for the other end of the social scale – no one is surprised when the son of a cobbler makes excellent shoes. Similarly, the people of Buddha’s time would have expected buddhas to have been born exclusively into specific castes or families.

“What are the components or ingredients that make Śākyamuni Buddha a ‘buddha’?”

Must blood run through a buddha’s veins? Is a mouth necessary? And ears? Is there a special buddha DNA, or a code that gets passed from one generation to another, like the DNA that causes hereditary high cholesterol?

“What is it that has the potential to become a buddha?” ‘Potential’ in the sense that milk has the potential to become yoghurt.

“Is ‘buddha’ just a historical figure?” Meaning, is ‘buddha’ only ever the Buddha we see depicted as statues and on temple walls with a lump on his head and curly hair, who was the son of Śuddhodana and Mahāmāyā?

“What are we referring to when we say ‘buddha’?”

By now, Vimalakīrti was no longer answering Mañjuśrī’s questions, Mañjuśrī was answering Vimalakīrti’s. And how touching and beautiful that Lord Mañjuśrī began referring to Vimalakīrti not as a patron, but as the ‘Son of a Noble Family’<sup>3</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> The translator of the sūtra has used the less specific rendering “Noble Sir” here for the Sanskrit term *kula Putra* (Tibetan *rigs kyi bu*), which (in both languages) means literally “son of a/the family”. In the sūtras this honorific form of address—and also the equivalent “daughter of a/the family”—is used in many dialogues when the Buddha or senior bodhisattvas are speaking of or to disciples, and is sometimes interpreted as meaning the sons or daughters of the Buddha’s “family”, i.e. bodhisattvas.



I wonder if we will ever be able to appreciate this conversation fully?

It's unbearable for many of us even to contemplate the notion that cleanliness can be found in the midst of filth. Yet cleanliness *can only* be found in filth. And for those of us who are stuck with the idea that cleanliness is a puritanical state that is entirely independent and separate from filth, emotions and defilements, such a statement is so bewildering as to be virtually inconceivable.

"Son of a Noble Family," said Mañjuśrī, "Emotions are the ingredients that make a buddha. Ignorance, craving, desire and anger *are* the buddha family."

Here, Mañjuśrī offered hope and encouragement by making a mockery of our ideas about clean and dirty. He said that good *can only* be found in the bad and the ugly. Was he merely giving a politically correct pep talk, or saying things he didn't mean just to cheer us up? No, he was expressing a hard and piercing truth. For some, it is an unbearable truth, but for others, it is the most encouraging thing we have ever heard.

"If you plant a seed in the sky," said Mañjuśrī, "It won't ever grow into a flower. Likewise, a buddha cannot arise from the uncompounded state; buddha – enlightenment – will only arise where there are compounded phenomena."

So Mañjuśrī is not denigrating compounded phenomena; he is not saying compounded phenomena are unholy, or some kind of stain. What he's saying is that compounded phenomena are impermanent, but even so, we venerate them. For the philosophically-minded, this is an important point.

## What is Non-duality?

A little further on, Vimalakīrti asked the bodhisattvas, "What is non-duality?" Each of them gave an extremely impressive answer – these bodhisattvas were not so dumb after all.

"When I think 'I' and 'mine', that is duality. When 'I' and 'mine' collapse, that is non-duality."

"Where there is defilement and purification, that is duality. When you go beyond defilement and purification, that is non-duality."

"Where there are virtuous and non-virtuous deeds, that is duality. When you go beyond the virtuous and non-virtuous, that is non-duality."



I wish those who claim to be Buddhists, but are so entangled in their own versions of virtue, morality and ethics that they look down on and detest the non-virtuous would read this; and I wish I could see the looks on their faces as they realise what it means.

“If you think this world is mundane and that another more sublime world also exists, that is duality. When you go beyond the mundane and the sublime, that is non-duality.”

The examples become increasingly elaborate and include explanations relating to all Six Pāramitās.

“If the pāramitā of generosity is understood as non-duality, that kind of generosity will lead you to liberation. The bodhisattva who understands this will also see that liberation itself is generosity.”

“If you long for liberation because you do not like saṃsāra, that is duality. The only way you can actualize non-duality is by going beyond liking liberation and disliking saṃsāra.”

## Śāriputra

Śrāvakayāna monks must finish eating their lunch before midday. If they don't, or if they miss lunch altogether, they have to wait until breakfast the next day before they can satisfy their hunger. By now Śāriputra's stomach was rumbling. Quickly checking the position of the sun, he saw that it was nearly midday, but there was no sign of lunch. He began to fidget.

Knowing full well that Śāriputra was famished, Vimalakīrti launched into another of his relentless scoldings.

“Śāriputra, you are distracted! You can't listen to the teachings properly with a distracted mind. Why aren't you listening! This is your opportunity to 'eat' something you have never even thought of before!”

At this point, Vimalakīrti introduces everyone to the Fragrant Buddhafield where absolutely everything smells divinely delectable. And as it was lunchtime there too, the aroma must have been especially mouth-watering.

“Who amongst you dare to go to the Fragrant Buddhafield to pick up some take-away?” asked Vimalakīrti, looking meaningfully at the bodhisattvas.

One thing you need to know before we go on is that Mañjuśrī had asked Vimalakīrti to demonstrate something to the bodhisattvas and, as



always, Vimalakīrti was more than willing to oblige. But to create the right circumstances, Mañjuśrī had to delve into his extensive repertoire of skilful tricks to ensure that none of the bodhisattvas volunteered.

“Aren’t you embarrassed?” scoffed Vimalakīrti, as he turned to face Mañjuśrī. “Look at your entourage. Not one of them is willing to fetch lunch!”

“But you forget,” retorted Mañjuśrī. “Buddha said we should never despise the uninformed.”

Instantly, Vimalakīrti created an avatar of himself in the form of a beautiful, golden bodhisattva.

“Go to the Fragrant Buddhafield and circumambulate Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa,” he said. “Prostrate to that Buddha, pay homage to him and beg him to give you the leftovers from his lunch. Then bring it here.”

Vimalakīrti’s avatar followed his orders to the letter.

The Fragrant Buddhafield is quite different to our world, and its inhabitants were fascinated by Vimalakīrti’s bodhisattva avatar, who looked as alien to them as E.T. looks to us. The avatar prostrated and paid homage to Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa, then begged the Buddha for his leftovers, which, he said, would be extremely beneficial in our world.

“I come from the world blessed by Buddha Śākyamuni,” said the avatar. “The people of our world love mediocrity and anything low-class, inferior or kitschy. You could say that I come from a world that lacks all good taste.”

The Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa’s disciples only knew the highest teachings and, as they had no idea what references or comparisons even were, they certainly couldn’t understand the concept of mediocrity.

“What can you mean?” they asked.

Here, in Vimalakīrti’s world, we are taught to be contemptuous of mediocrity and bad taste, but the attitude of Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa and his disciples in the Fragrant Buddhafield was quite different. In fact, the Tathāgata began to sing the praises of the avatar’s alien world and its people who so love the ordinary and the commonplace. He also heaped praise on Śākyamuni Buddha, who, he said, was exceptional, even amongst buddhas, for having the courage, wisdom and skill to appear in a realm peopled by such lacklustre and pedestrian beings. Who else would have chosen to go there? It was like living on Boulevard Saint-Germain or Rue Saint-Honoré and doing all your shopping on the Champs-Élysées.

Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa explained to his disciples that the avatar was a manifestation of one of Śākyamuni’s disciples.

“This is what a disciple of Śākyamuni looks like. Isn’t he magnificent! Yet he comes from a world where people willingly settle for the merely adequate.”

As he spoke, the Tathāgata gathered his leftovers, packed them beautifully and gave them to Vimalakīrti’s avatar.

Many of the Tathāgata’s disciples were intrigued by the idea of such an indifferent world, and when it was time for the avatar to go home, they volunteered to return with him. They wanted to see mediocrity for themselves, like the Japanese who visit India for the thrill of experiencing dust, chaos, dirt and the fetid stench.

“Be very careful,” said the Tathāgata. “I doubt the people of this avatar’s world will be able to tolerate your beauty and fragrance. You might well send them mad! So tone it down a bit.”

Before everyone left, there was a discussion about the difference between how Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa and Śākyamuni Buddha taught. One of them taught beings with good taste, and the other taught beings with very bad taste. But what is meant by ‘bad taste’, and what is ‘mediocrity’? Specifically, what makes our world so comparatively prosaic? As they talked, it became clear just how difficult it is to teach the undiscerning, which Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa demonstrated when he spoke at length of his immense admiration for Śākyamuni Buddha’s exceptional ability to teach at a pedestrian level. He even praised the very mediocrity of Śākyamuni’s teachings.

At this point, the Vimalakīrti Sūtra seems to be examining taste and class. Teaching those who love mediocrity is like trying to introduce a man from mainland China who dresses head to foot in Versace – Versace underwear, Versace shirt, Versace hat, Versace perfume – to the concept of good taste. How can you convince him that he would look far more elegant in a simple white t-shirt, blue jeans and a grey scarf than in Versace’s multi-coloured confections? You can’t! Because the Versace fan is only interested in buying entire collections of brands that are instantly recognizable and extremely expensive. To persuade such a person to develop a sense of elegance is far from easy.

Teachings like karma, reincarnation, generosity, discipline and mindfulness, all fall into the category of mediocre teachings. By now, you are probably wondering what is meant here by ‘mediocre’. From what I can make out, for Vimalakīrti, mediocre teachings say things like: if you are bad and act badly you will suffer and go to hell; if you are good and your actions

are good, you will experience bliss and go to heaven; if you feel desire, you should tame it; and if you get angry, you should control your anger then get rid of it. Mediocre teachings are those that make stark judgements and clear distinctions, and they are given to people who can only chew and digest mediocre information. From this point of view, all the Buddha's step-by-step teachings and methods fall into the category of mediocre teachings.

For example, a mediocre method for weaning the Chinese man off his obsession with Versace is to take him to Paris or Rome and introduce him to a circle of kind, self-assured people who are truly elegant. As the Chinese man spends more and more time with his new friends, they will gently discourage him from hanging out with the *nouveau riche*, and show by example that slavishly dressing in flashy, expensive brands will never bring him the self-confidence for which he longs. Slowly, step-by-step, their kindness and natural poise will lure him away from his Versace obsession and towards a more refined style. And this is exactly what the mediocre teachings do. They lure us towards the higher truths through indirect teachings. For many of us, this method is our only hope of ever approaching the higher truths. Yet, we do so love mediocre teachings! We cling to them and cannot do without them, which is why, out of his great compassion, the Buddha gave so many.

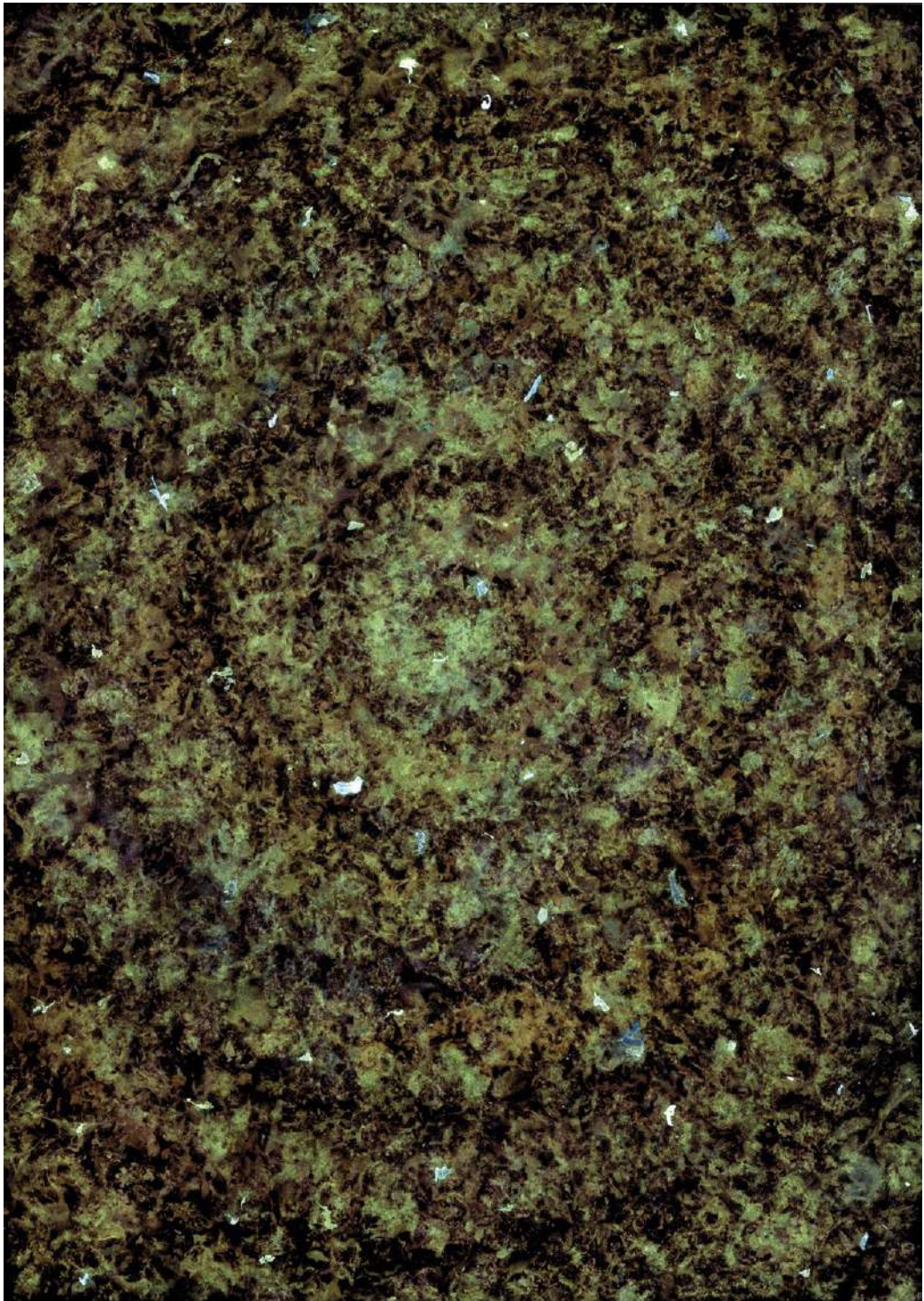
## Ānanda

Back in the mango grove, Śākyamuni Buddha continued to teach, attended only by Ānanda – all the other disciples had followed Mañjuśrī to Vaiśālī. Suddenly, the grove was filled with golden light.

“What’s going on?” asked Ānanda.

“It’s a sign that Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī have finished talking. They are on their way back,” replied the Buddha.

Not only were Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī returning to the mango grove. They were followed by everyone who had witnessed their conversation – all the kings, queens, ministers, monks and people from all walks of life – in a chaotic, makeshift procession, which I’m sure must also have included all the usual Indian paraphernalia, like parasols, horns, elephants, horses, peacock feather fans, dancing girls, gaudy colours, sparkling fabrics, lights and incense.



As soon as he entered the mango grove, Vimalakīrti threw himself at the Buddha's feet, like a felled tree – another lesson to note. Until now, this oily-haired sensualist has seemed arrogant, spoilt and frankly not easy to get on with. But here, we are told that he humbly prostrated himself before Gautama Buddha and then circumambulated him, followed by all the arhats and bodhisattvas.

As Vimalakīrti paid homage, Śāriputra updated Buddha about what had happened.

“What's that smell?” asked Ānanda. “I don't recognize it?”

“That's the scent exuded by bodhisattvas from the Fragrant Buddhafield,” explained the Buddha.

“But even the members of our own Saṅgha seem to have picked it up,” said Ānanda. “How did that happen?”

“They smell like the Fragrant Buddhafield bodhisattvas because they ate Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa's leftovers,” said Buddha.

Why is food – and for that matter leftover food – such a big deal in this story? Food generally implies sustenance, and eating food is one of the ways we maintain our bodies. But from the Buddhist point of view, body, speech and mind all require methods of sustenance to maintain the thread. Deluded beings like us make a terrible fuss about maintaining our physical body, but the emphasis in Buddhadharmā is on how to sustain the mind. And here, in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa's leftovers lead to a profound and lengthy discussion about how to do just that.

Samādhi meditation, we are told, is the only method for sustaining the mind. While this statement can be taken metaphorically, it should also be taken literally. Meditation, concentration and calm abiding definitely do maintain mind's health. At the same time, as mind is in charge of and leads the body, an experienced meditator's appetite for food will be noticeably different to that of someone who doesn't meditate. The greed experienced by non-meditators can be insatiable – some people eat like hogs. I've been told that not long before the fall of the Roman Empire, rich Romans would stuff themselves, then vomit, so they could start the meal all over again. Even today, most of us are more or less bulimic. Just as we don't need more than one or two pairs of shoes – and we certainly don't need so many clothes that our wardrobe bursts open – we eat far more than is strictly necessary. More often than not, we don't eat to nourish and sustain ourselves, but just because we want to. It's ridiculous! Our intake of food is driven by 'want' not 'necessity'.

But once you start to practice meditation, even if your śamatha practice is mediocre, you won't need to eat as much you did because very little will give you all the energy you need. And remember, a diminished appetite for food isn't even a miracle, it is merely a side-effect of śamatha practice.

As we practise, as we get more and more accustomed to the right view and more savvy about how to overcome distraction, our definition of 'sustenance', 'maintenance' and 'food' will change. We will become more discerning about our eating habits and will see that it's far healthier to eat real food than ready-made processed meals. We will also become more discerning about many of the other 'diets' we follow, like our diets of sound, clothes, cars, bank balances, pension plans, relationships, friendships, and so on.

How to free ourselves from want and need is a very big subject, but essentially, it can be achieved through practice and, as we gradually free ourselves, our definition of 'sustenance' will change. A major step towards following a healthy diet is learning how to deal with the need to eat. Also, deluded beings cannot understand non-duality, but we do feel a need for 'union', and this is why we long for relationships and friendship, hugs, contact, intercourse, kissing, pinching...

Back in the mango grove, all those who had followed Mañjuśrī to Vaiśālī had now returned.

"So, Vimalakīrti," said the Buddha, "how do you view the Buddha?"

Buddha is beyond form, said Vimalakīrti, beyond feeling, beyond karmic formation, beyond symbol, beyond time. Tathāgata is not darkness, not illumination, not a name, not a mark, not a reference, not powerful, not weak. Tathāgata has no form, no eyes, no ears, no gender... and so on.

For most of us, the term 'buddha' means the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, whose manifestation adhered to the categories of gender, time and space. But here, Vimalakīrti explains how to see buddha on the absolute level: how to see the 'absolute buddha'. Then a little later in this chapter, the rug is once again pulled out from under our feet when Buddha asked Vimalakīrti to show everyone Buddha Akṣobhya and his buddhafield. In an instant, Vimalakīrti performed a stupendous miracle and the magnificent buddhafield of Abhirati was displayed for all to see.

As always, the setting of this scene is important. A huge audience of disciples had just been told that 'buddha' was beyond form, feeling, and so on. Yet Śākyamuni Buddha then asked Vimalakīrti to reveal the physical

manifestation of Akṣobhya's Buddhafield. Vimalakīrti did as Buddha asked, and the text suggests it was as if he had merely drawn back a curtain. There, displayed before them, everyone saw the high mountains, wide rivers, lush valleys, gleaming palaces surrounded by lotus ponds and swans, forests of wishfulfilling trees and bright skyful of birds that make up Akṣobhya's realm. But whatever buddhafields look like to us, they are defined in terms of non-duality. For example, a meadow in a buddhafield will have no east. And if there is no east, there can be no south, no middle, no boundary, no top and no bottom. All of which takes us straight back to non-duality and how to explain the unexplainable.

## The Epilogue

The final part of the Vimalakīrti Sūtra is a discussion between Mañjuśrī, Vimalakīrti and the other bodhisattvas about the future; specifically, about what will happen in the time of degeneration, long after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa.

Some of us might still want to label everything we read in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra as myth and legend, or at best, a historical account of events that took place millennia ago. We might also think that Śāriputra, Ānanda and everyone else alive at that time were extremely lucky to have known the Buddha personally, and to have met such remarkable bodhisattvas as Vimalakīrti in the flesh. As none of us have had that opportunity, were we therefore born in the wrong place at the wrong time? Not necessarily.

In this epilogue, the Buddha clearly states that if this sūtra is written down, treasured, kept in your home or even worn; if you copy excerpts into a notebook and venerate each word, or bless yourself with this sūtra, or if you love discussing this sūtra and love hearing others talk about it, you will accumulate merit. And not just a little merit. Imagine giving all the buddhas of the ten directions and bodhisattvas of the three times lunch and dinner for aeons, while continuously making offerings of hundreds of kilos of gold, diamonds, silver and other valuable and desirable material goods. Wouldn't that kind of generosity accumulate a huge amount of merit? Of course it would! An immense, incalculable mountain of merit. But nothing in comparison to the merit you can accumulate, particularly in these degenerate times, by merely discussing the subjects mentioned in this sūtra for a few moments.



When Buddha fell silent, Lord Indra, King of the Gods, rose to his feet and volunteered to be the protector of this Dharma. No matter where this sūtra is heard, taught, discussed, printed, written, stored, or found – in cities, villages, streets, gardens, swimming pools, hermitages or mountaintops – Lord Indra pledged to venerate and pay homage to everyone who is touched by it, who loves it and who longs to preserve it.

Buddha rejoiced at Lord Indra's commitment.

“Such discussions are the supreme offering of Dharma, of truth,” he said. “To protect any strategies, wisdom or books that are in conflict with saṃsāra is an incalculably worthy activity. If you want to resist or create friction with duality, you will find all the ammunition you need in this sūtra. It's the best! Therefore, King of the Gods, you are doing the right thing. Protect it well and treasure it, as the Vimalakīrti Sūtra is an exceptionally effective weapon for wreaking havoc, even mass destruction, on the dualistic world.”

Finally, Buddha turned to Ānanda and asked him to cherish this teaching, at which everyone in the mango grove – the bodhisattvas, arhats, śrāvakas, gods, demi-gods, rākṣasas and yakṣas – rejoiced.





By now you must have realized that the Vimalakīrti Sūtra is no ordinary sūtra.

It's difficult for those of us living in today's mundane world to swallow the truth when we hear it, and the Vimalakīrti Sūtra contains a great deal about the very highest of high truths. Don't imagine, though, that the nature of the highest truth is mystical or mythological, because it isn't. Although the absolute truth cannot be expressed, conceived or conceptualised, all the techniques and tools necessary to establish it have been laid out for us by the Buddha himself. The Vimalakīrti Sūtra, for example, describes astonishingly effective methods for deconstructing anything and everything that is not the truth.

I know I'm repeating myself, but make no mistake, this sūtra is *extremely profound*. And it's because sūtras like this are so profound that we study the commentaries, the 'śāstras', which help explain them. Buddha's disciples and celebrated bodhisattvas wrote some of the commentaries available to us, but far more were written by great Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan scholars. These scholars were not just logicians or theoreticians, they were highly accomplished practitioners who put the teachings they found in sūtras like the Vimalakīrti Sūtra into practice and, as a result, no longer fell victim to praise, criticism, gain or loss – an accomplishment they demonstrated again and again.

The discussions we find in this sūtra are not mere intellectual exercises. They are not like the philosophical speculations that beret-wearing, French existentialists engaged in at the beginning of the 20th century in coffee shops on the left-bank of the Seine, as they squinted through thick, bottle-bottom glasses and chewed fat cigars. I can state with complete confidence that every single method Buddha offered to help sentient beings is rooted in the conversations recorded in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra and other similar texts. Lighting candles, for example, and burning incense, shaving your head and renouncing the mundane world, refraining from eating meat and having sex are just a few of the methods mentioned. Other methods were designed for bodhisattvas, who are actively encouraged to do anything and everything that temporal societies frown upon or consider immoral, like stealing and lying.

We have all heard stories about bodhisattvas who gave away their most precious possessions, their children, estates, homes and even their beloved spouses to help others. And of course, there's the famous story about the bodhisattva who offered his own body to a family of hungry tigers. But

for most of us, this kind of activity sounds not only far-fetched, but as unbelievable as the fairy tale about a princess who kissed a frog. Yet historically there were, and still are, bodhisattvas who can chew and swallow such seemingly unbelievable stories. These bodhisattvas can drink the nectar of all the subjects discussed in this sūtra because they have both crushed the habit of clinging to their egos and demolished the wall of duality. Such bodhisattvas are not bound by the distinctions of good and bad, or quantity and quality; they see everything as an illusion, or a dream, or magic. They have as few qualms about offering their own flesh to hungry tigers as the rest of us would have about flattening a sandcastle, however beautifully it had been sculpted. And if, by giving away their most treasured possession they can help someone, they don't think twice. Basically, bodhisattvas do whatever it takes to help.

The Vimalakīrti Sūtra is not an expedient sūtra because, unlike The Sūtra of the Wise and the Foolish (the Damamūka Sūtra), or the Jātaka Tales, or even the Vinaya texts, at a certain level it cannot be taken literally. Expedient sūtras were conditional teachings that were taught for those who think in terms of ethics, morality, discipline, reincarnation, karma and consequences; for people who want to do the right thing and don't want to do the wrong thing. The Vimalakīrti Sūtra is definitely not that kind of sūtra.

Expedient sūtras are for those who cannot chew on really big ideas. In the same way babies cannot chew or swallow solid food, expedient sūtras are designed for those who find big ideas difficult to digest. Expedient sūtras are interesting and easy to accept; they employ ordinary logic and thought patterns, like don't kill, don't steal, walk slowly, wash your hands properly, don't use harsh words, sit straight, focus on your breath. 'All compounded things are impermanent', 'all emotions are pain' and similar teachings that require a little explanation are also amongst those designed by the Buddha to be chewable and digestible.

Teachings like those found in the Vajracchedikā Sūtra, the Vimalakīrti Sūtra and the Mañjuśrī Sūtra<sup>4</sup> are more akin to solid food – or a shot of tequila that you down in one, without salt or lemon. They are definitely not prim and proper, moralistic teachings. They are direct and go straight to the heart of the matter.

---

4 *Mañjuśrīnirdeśasūtra*



Although many of us are inspired by and may even be fairly familiar with the Buddha's teachings, we don't really understand them. Truly to understand the Buddha's Dharma is difficult, extremely difficult. For example, don't kid yourself that you understand *śūnyatā*, because you don't – habitual, subjective mind does not allow itself to understand *śūnyatā*. Although we love to think that our minds are objective, they aren't. In fact, there is no such thing as an objective mind. Quite the opposite, as the dose of subjective mind to be found in human beings like us is dangerously high – especially amongst adults and the well-educated. Clever people, painfully over-stuffed as they are with their own ideas, are usually the most subjective and opinionated of all. But don't bother trying to point out their complete lack of objectivity, because they won't listen.

In their *śāstras*, great commentators like Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Bhāvaviveka, Śāntideva, Maitreya and the rest mapped out a systematic way of thinking about, deciphering and deconstructing thoughts and ideas from every possible angle. These texts are invaluable, because without them it is almost impossible to get to the bottom of Buddhist concepts like *śūnyatā* in one go. This is why the beginning of the Vajracchedikā Sūtra, which sets the scene for the rest of the sūtra, is so important and a very good example of just how important scene-setting in sūtras can be. From it we learn, along with many other details, how the Buddha's begging bowl was washed, how his table was set, how a dharma robe was folded correctly, how a monk's seat was covered in a special cloth, and that when the Buddha sat cross-legged his back was very straight. We are also treated to beautiful descriptions of trees and the serenity of the natural environment in which the teachings took place. Setting the scene was taken very seriously! And it's only after the scene has been set that we are presented with the teachings on *śūnyatā*.

In the Vajracchedikā Sūtra, there is an account of a conversation between the Buddha and Subhūti that included a very significant question.

“Have I taught?” asked Buddha.

“No, you haven't,” replied Subhūti. And Buddha agreed.

“Exactly!” he said. “Buddha never taught!”

At the same time, we must remember that *śūnyatā* should never be understood as a total negation, or a form of nihilism. This point is demonstrated exquisitely in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra. Like the Vajracchedikā Sūtra, the scene is set with scrupulous care and in great detail. Remember the very beginning of the book, where Buddha miraculously transforms five hundred parasols

into one, then fits the whole universe beneath it? It's mind-boggling stuff, like watching a fantasy movie. In less than five minutes the reader is hooked, then, brought back down to earth with a bump.

One thing I love about this sūtra is that it involves so many larger-than-life characters, like Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, Ānanda and Subhūti. These men were the epitome of the greatest philosophers, thinkers and spiritual renunciants of that time and, just as today's intellectuals and academics despise empty-headed, coarse, nouveau-riche businessmen, they were horrified by Vimalakīrti. How could such a philistine know anything worthwhile? As far as they were concerned, all Vimalakīrti was good for was making money, devouring rich food, throwing dissolute parties, then making more money. Did he even have access to his inner world? Of course not!

We ignorant beings habitually judge by appearances. Given Vimalakīrti's looks and lifestyle, would any of us have guessed that he knew anything at all about the Dharma? Let alone that he was so realized? He was the kind of man we would ask about the price of silver or gold, but none of us would even think of consulting him about the meaning of śūnyatā. And as for his ability to deconstruct the teachings as he did – unimaginable!

How they must have stared at the vulgar, obscenely expensive jewellery that dripped from his body, not to mention his glistening skin – the result of hours spent soaking in perfumed baths as his girls exfoliated every inch of his skin with bean powder soap and precious oils. Such details about how the rich lived appear in several sūtras, not just this one. They are important because what Vimalakīrti looked like and how he lived helped set the scene for the rest of the sūtra.

The Vimalakīrti Sūtra demonstrates again and again that understanding the wisdom that is the ultimate truth need not be approached using conventional methods. Our habit is to study a subject by reading, writing, questioning, debating, making footnotes, library-hopping, and doing a great deal of contemplation. But actually, enlightenment can be attained using any method whatsoever. Śāriputra's sex change, a certain Buddha's leftover food and the use of delicious fragrances are just some of the methods that evoke the tantric practice of visualization. When we practise visualization, we imagine beings of both genders, whose bodies could be any colour and who might have any number of arms, legs and heads. They also have the ability to sit on fragile lotus petals without crushing them.

If a little lemon juice is added to some milk, what happens? The milk curdles and the whey and curds separate. On the face of it, lemons have nothing to do with milk. Yet once you know this simple trick, you can make curd. The Tibetan word for skilful methods is *thabs* (Skt. *upāya*). *Thabs* brings with it the connotation of ‘trick’, or even ‘catalyst’, because skilful methods speed things up without affecting the elements involved. In this case, we use skilful methods to tame the mind – and as the Buddha, Mañjuśrī, Maitreya, Śāntideva and all the great masters have said, the mind really does need taming. So, we sit up straight and look at our minds. But what does sitting with a straight back have to do with the mind? It doesn’t make sense. If sitting straight-backed really does help tame the mind, shouldn’t sleeping straight-backed work too? Or walking straight-backed? No, not at all. Because it’s only sitting with a straight back that quickly and painlessly brings about the right effect.

Ideally, a skilled spiritual master will change the skilful method or trick he uses to suit the capacity of the person he is dealing with. Does lemon have the same effect on wine that it has on cow’s milk? No. Even if litres and litres of lemon juice were added to wine, it would not separate into curds and whey. Similarly, a skilful method that works extremely well for one person might be useless for someone else. This is why the path is so meticulous and complex, and also why it’s so intriguing. When the right trick is applied to the right person, the right result is achieved. The Mahāyāna really excels when it comes to this kind of method, and especially the Mahāyāna path of Tantra, which knows all the tricks.

The Vimalakīrti Sūtra isn’t a tantric text, it’s a Mahāyāna sūtra, yet many of the statements made in this text are identical to those made in the Tantrayāna. In fact, some of the most important tantric principles can be found in this sūtra. Or to put it another way, the courage, openness and outrageousness of the Vajrayāna, as well as its often unnerving, even shocking methods, are a direct outcome of the teachings and wisdom that are openly discussed in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra, which in turn provides a firm foundation for the Vajrayāna’s inconceivable wisdom and methods.

The Vajrayāna can unhesitatingly employ its unique method of taking emotions as the path, because its basis lies in statements like, “Emotions are the radiance of the Buddha” and “Lotuses can only be found in wet mud, not where it’s dry”. Even if a so-called chair has only ever been used as a table, as soon as someone sits on it, it instantly becomes multifunctional. At that

moment, all clinging to the idea that the chair only works as a table collapses and, from then on, it can be used as both a table and a chair.

From a more intellectual and practical perspective, emotions only become so-called emotions – ‘so-called’ is important here – when they are not accompanied by awareness. How does that work? Imagine you are peeing in the open air. Suddenly, you notice someone walking directly towards you. What is your automatic reaction? To stop peeing – it’s part of our conditioning. Similarly, when you feel extreme anger, jealousy and pride, if you inject even a drop of the virus of awareness into that emotion, it will get sick. And a sick emotion is what you need, because a sick emotion is a weak emotion. The problem is that most of us leave it far too late to inject ourselves, and that delay helps our emotions become enormously fat and surprisingly agile. This is why Buddha offered us this path, and it’s a path that can be distinguished from all others because simply being aware is entirely painless.

Most people expect that first injection of awareness to work immediately, but as it’s the first time in hundreds of lifetimes that we have applied awareness to our emotions, the effect will only last for a split second. We also expect every scrap of jealousy, or anger, or pride to disappear instantly and forever – and obviously, that doesn’t happen. It’s because we continue to experience emotions that some practitioners become disillusioned with their practice. Having spent so many years meditating and flattened hundreds of zafus, how is it possible still to feel jealous? It’s very discouraging.

Learn to be satisfied with consistency. Every time an emotion arises, just be satisfied that you remembered to inject it with that irritating virus of awareness. It’ll take a few years to see any observable effects, but in time, you will begin to notice your emotions as they arise and, eventually, you may even be able to laugh at yourself for feeling jealous in the first place. Jealousy isn’t the only emotion that can overwhelm you, all emotions can – feeling ridiculous, for example.

Beginners on the spiritual path have no idea what obstacles look like. Your responses to your emotional risings are like weeds in a flowerbed and unless you are a gardener you won’t know the difference. Learning to identify a weed as a weed will take time, but once you can do that, you are not doing badly.

The wisdom discussed in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra and the wisdom behind the Vajrayāna’s ‘you should do and think the unthinkable’ are the same. Thanks

to this wisdom, Buddhism has never been limited to one geographic region or race. Nor has it become a survival kit for just one nationality, or the by-product of political struggle, psychological debate or scientific investigation.

The Buddhist teachings and path to enlightenment were inspired by a pure experience of suffering. That experience triggered the wish to get to the bottom of what suffering really is, aroused the determination to completely rid human beings of suffering, and culminated in the realization that ignorance of the truth is the cause of all suffering.

Ultimately, Buddhadharma leads to a final truth, the absolute truth. This absolute truth is far from easy to understand, yet it lies at the heart of all the fascinating, revealing, illuminating and often hilarious conversations that we find in the Vimalakīrti Sūtra.

As I've said many times, it's impossible for someone like me to understand the teachings in this sūtra or, for that matter, any of the Buddha's vast and profound teachings.

More than twenty-five centuries have passed since the Tathāgata, the King of the Bipedes, the Bull of a Man, the Prince of the Śākya, the Conqueror of the Three Worlds, the Teacher of Gods and Humans and Saviour of All Beings pretended not to exist on this planet. In that time, the Buddha's teachings have spread to places as far away and exotic as the richly ornamented palaces of the Japanese and Chinese emperors, which are so vibrant and ornate that even Vimalakīrti might have envied them. Some of the world's most altruistic, illustrious and effective people, from Nāgārjuna to Tang Empress Wu Zetian, have honoured and adored the Buddha's words. Today, his words are being translated so that blue-eyed, freckle-nosed, mahogany- and coffee-tinted beings with golden and coral-hued hair can also read, appreciate and contemplate their wisdom. Those of you who actually take the Buddha's advice to heart will reap many rewards, not least of which is learning how to release yourselves from the meaningless stress, tension, clinging and obsession that so characterize modern life.

Once a teaching has been around for a while, it's important to consult and examine its source texts. For Muslims, that source is the Koran; for Christians, it's the Bible; and for Jews, it's the Tanakh. The source of all the Buddha's teachings is the sūtras, because it's the sūtras that faithfully record the Buddha's own words. As the sūtras are Buddhadharma's bottom line, it's

therefore crucial for all Buddhists to read, learn and explore them with an open heart.

There are those who, feigning open-mindedness and objectivity – which in reality is more like guilt and hypocrisy – try desperately to identify something good and worthwhile in philosophies that are essentially violent and hateful. Having done so, they put all their energy into convincing the rest of us that, although it's buried in brutal hostility, that shred of 'good' makes a hate-generating philosophy worthwhile, even admirable. At the same time, out of jealousy or rage or whatever, others seem just as determined to find fault in a path that is overwhelmingly beneficial, compassionate and useful. They go to great lengths to persuade anyone who will listen that, in spite of appearances, no philosophy can be *that* good and there must be something fishy about it. In such a climate, it's even more important for Buddhists to examine our source material. This is why it's crucial that we translate the sūtras and make them as widely available as possible, not just for today's students, but to secure the future of the Buddhadharmā.

You are probably wondering where I found the courage to attempt to write this text, or how someone like me could even think about introducing the words of the Perfect One? Some time ago, two worldly business people, Tianqiao and Chrissy Chen, requested that I write a preface to a new edition of the Vimalakīrti Sūtra. I was so moved by the wholesomeness of their strong aspiration and wish to make this sūtra available to as many people as they could that I agreed. Of course, the danger is that I end up somehow staining the Perfect One's teachings – imperfect creature that I am. But when I thought about it, I realized that if this book can encourage you, its readers, to excavate your minds and extract just a few more good thoughts; if it can inspire you to make the effort to accumulate merit; if it can pique your curiosity enough for you to start exploring the vast and profound wisdom of the Buddha, then it's worth the risk. This is why I agreed to write this preface. My friend Janine Schulz helped make it readable. Andreas Schulz, Du Yi, Helena Wang, Huang Jing Rui, Jain Feng, Jennifer Qi, John Canti, Kris Yao, Naya Fang, Sarah K. C. Wilkinson, Ushnisha Ng, and many others have put a great deal of effort into illustrating, translating, editing, proofreading, researching, correcting and distributing it. May they, and all those who read, hold and possess this sūtra, achieve enlightenment. In the meantime, may we all encounter someone like Vimalakīrti, who has the courage to poke holes in our concepts, point out our hangups and provoke our inhibitions.



The Sūtra of  
The Teaching of Vimalakīrti

*From the translator's preface to the original edition*

I sincerely thank my friend and benefactor, Dr. C. T. Shen, both for his sponsorship of the work and for his most helpful collaboration in the work of comparing the Tibetan and Chinese versions. We were sometimes joined in our round-table discussions by Drs. C. S. George, Tao-Tien Yi, F. S. K. Koo, and T. C. Tsao, whose helpful suggestions I gratefully acknowledge. My thanks also go to Ms. Yeshe Tsomo and Ms. Leah Zahler for their invaluable editorial assistance, and to Ms. Carole Schwager and the staff of The Pennsylvania State University Press.

*Translator's preface to the online electronic edition*

I earnestly thank Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche for his great efforts in creating the project *84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha*, to present in English the many great works of the Buddha's teachings freely to the world.

I also thank John Canti of 84000 for his careful, creative, and very learned translating and editorial work on this electronic edition, without which this improved translation would not have materialized. I thank Mr. Patrick Alexander, of the Penn State University Press, who was the one who informed me that the copyright to my original translation done for the Institute for Advanced Studies of World Religions had reverted to me upon the termination of that Institute, to which I had previously conveyed my rights. I intend to publish in print form a further update of that original version at a future time. Since there have been a number of free-floating electronic forms of this text on the internet for some years now, I am happy that the sūtra in its current revision is now available in the 84000 Reading Room, among the many other translations on that site. Sarva maṅgalaṃ!

*Note to bilingual readers*

Bilingual readers who compare the English and Chinese versions of this book will notice that the two versions of the sūtra, even allowing for language differences, are not completely identical in all passages. The Chinese version reproduces Kumārajīva's fifth century translation into Chinese, while the

English is a translation by Robert Thurman from the Tibetan, preserved in the Kangyur and translated from a Sanskrit original in the early ninth century by Chönyi Tsültrim. For details of the different versions of the sūtra that exist today, please refer to Professor Thurman's Introduction in the full version of the text in the Reading Room.

# The Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra

## The Teaching of Vimalakīrti

Āryavimalakīrtinirdeśanāmamahāyānasūtra  
*Toh 176, Degé Kangyur vol. 60 (mdo sde, ma), folios 175b–239a*

### 1

#### Purification of the Buddhafield

Reverence to all the buddhas, bodhisattvas, noble disciples, and pratyekabuddhas, in the past, the present, and the future.

Thus did I hear on a single occasion. The Lord Buddha was in residence in the garden of Āmrapālī, in the city of Vaiśālī, attended by a great gathering. Of bhikṣus there were eight thousand, all arhats. They were free from impurities and afflictions, and all had attained self-mastery. Their minds were entirely liberated by perfect knowledge. They were calm and dignified, like royal elephants. They had accomplished their work, done what they had to do, cast off their burdens, attained their goals, and totally destroyed the bonds of existence. Their true knowledge had made their minds entirely free. They all had attained the utmost perfection of every form of control over their minds.

Of bodhisattvas there were thirty-two thousand, great spiritual heroes who were universally acclaimed. They were dedicated through the penetrating activity of their great superknowledges and were sustained by the grace of the Buddha. Guardians of the city of Dharma, they upheld the true doctrine,

and their great teachings resounded like the lion's roar throughout the ten directions. Without having to be asked, they were the natural spiritual benefactors of all living beings. They maintained unbroken the succession of the Three Jewels, conquering devils and foes and overwhelming all critics.

Their mindfulness, intelligence, realization, meditation, incantation, and eloquence all were perfected. They were free of all obscurations and emotional involvements, living in liberation without impediment. They were totally dedicated through the transcendences of generosity, subdued, unwavering, and sincere morality, tolerance, effort, meditation, wisdom, skill in liberative art, commitment, power, and gnosis. They had attained the intuitive tolerance of the ultimate incomprehensibility and unborn nature of all things. They turned the irreversible wheel of the Dharma. They were stamped with the insignia of signlessness.

They were expert in knowing the spiritual faculties of all living beings. They were brave with the confidence that overawes all assemblies. They had gathered the great stores of merit and of wisdom, and their bodies, beautiful without ornaments, were adorned with all the auspicious signs and marks. They were exalted in fame and glory, like the lofty summit of Mount Sumeru. Their high resolve as hard as diamond, unbreakable in their faith in Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha, they showered forth the rain of ambrosia that is released by the light rays of the jewel of the Dharma, which shines everywhere.

Their voices were perfect in diction and resonance, and versatile in speaking all languages. They had penetrated the profound principle of relativity and had destroyed the persistence of the instinctual mental habits underlying all convictions concerning finitude and infinitude. They spoke fearlessly, like lions, sounding the thunder of the magnificent teaching. Unequaled, they surpassed all measure. They were the best captains for the voyage of discovery of the treasures of the Dharma, the stores of merit and wisdom.

They were expert in the way of the Dharma, which is straight, peaceful, subtle, gentle, hard to see, and difficult to realize. They were endowed with the wisdom that is able to understand the thoughts of living beings, as well as their comings and goings. They had been consecrated with the anointment of the peerless gnosis of the Buddha. With their high resolve, they approached the ten powers, the four fearlessnesses, and the eighteen special qualities of the Buddha.

They had crossed the terrifying abyss of the bad migrations, and yet they assumed reincarnation voluntarily in all migrations for the sake of disciplining

living beings. Great Kings of medicine, understanding all the sicknesses of passions, they could apply the medicine of the Dharma appropriately.

They were inexhaustible, mines of limitless virtues, and they glorified innumerable buddhafi elds with the splendor of these virtues. They conferred great benefit when seen, heard, or even approached. Were one to extol them for innumerable hundreds of thousands of myriads of eons, one still could not exhaust their mighty flood of virtues.

These bodhisattvas were named: Samadarśin, Samaviṣamadarśin, Samādhivikurvaṇarāja, Dharmeśvara, Dharmaketu, Prabhāketu, Prabhāvyyūha, Ratnavyyūha, Mahāvyyūha, Pratibhāṇakūṭa, Ratnakūṭa, Ratnapāṇi, Ratnamudrāhastā, Nityokṣiptahastā, Nityopalakṣṭahastā, Nityokkaṇṭhita, Nityaprahasitapramuditendriya, Prāmodyarāja, Devarāja, Praṇidhiprayātaprāpta, Pratiṣaṃvitpraṇādaprāpta, Gaganagaṇja, Ratnolkādhārin, Ratnavīra, Ratnananda, Ratnaśrī, Indrajāla, Jālinīprabha, Anārambaṇadhyāyin, Prajñākūṭa, Ratnajaha, Mārapramardin, Vidyuddeva, Vikurvaṇarāja, Lakṣaṇakūṭasamatikrānta, Siṃhaghoṣābhigarjitaśvara, Śailaśikharaṣaṃghaṭṭanarāja, Gandhahastin, Gajagandhahastin, Satatodyukta, Anikṣiptadhura, Sumati, Sujāta, Padmaṣṛigarbha, Padmavyūha, Avalokiteśvara, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, Brahmajāla, Ratnayaṣṭin, Mārajit, Kṣetralaṃkṛta, Maṇiratnacchattra, Suvarnacūḍa, Maṇicūḍa, Maitreya, Mañjuśrīkumārabhūta, and so forth, with the remainder of the thirty-two thousand.

There were also gathered there ten thousand Brahmās, at their head Brahmā Śikhin, who had come from the Aśoka universe with its four sectors to see, venerate, and serve the Buddha and to hear the Dharma from his own mouth. There were twelve thousand Śakras from various four-sector universes. And there were other powerful gods: Brahmās, Śakras, Lokapālas, devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, and mahoragas. Finally, there was the fourfold community, consisting of bhikṣus, bhikṣuṇīs, laymen, and laywomen.

The Lord Buddha, thus surrounded and venerated by these multitudes of many hundreds of thousands of living beings, sat upon a majestic lion-throne and began to teach the Dharma. Dominating all the multitudes, just as Sumeru, the king of mountains, looms high over the oceans, the Lord Buddha shone, radiated, and glittered as he sat upon his magnificent lion-throne.

Thereupon, the Licchavi bodhisattva Ratnākara, with five hundred Licchavi youths, each holding a precious parasol made of seven different

kinds of jewels, came forth from the city of Vaiśālī and presented himself at the grove of Āmrāpālī. Each approached the Buddha, bowed at his feet, circumambulated him clockwise seven times, laid down his precious parasol in offering, and withdrew to one side.

As soon as all these precious parasols had been laid down, suddenly, by the miraculous power of the Lord, they were transformed into a single precious canopy so great that it formed a covering for this entire billion-world galaxy. The surface of the entire billion-world galaxy was reflected in the interior of the great precious canopy, where the total content of this galaxy could be seen: limitless mansions of suns, moons, and stellar bodies; the realms of the devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, and mahoragas, as well as the realms of the four Mahārājas; the king of mountains, Mount Sumeru; Mount Hīmava, Mount Mucilinda, Mount Mahāmucilinda, Mount Gandhamādāna, Mount Ratnaparvata, Mount Kālaparvata, Mount Cakravāḍa, Mount Mahācakravāḍa; all the great oceans, rivers, bays, torrents, streams, brooks, and springs; finally, all the villages, suburbs, cities, capitals, provinces, and wildernesses. All this could be clearly seen by everyone. And the voices of all the buddhas of the ten directions could be heard proclaiming their teachings of the Dharma in all the worlds, the sounds reverberating in the space beneath the great precious canopy.

At this vision of the magnificent miracle effected by the supernatural power of the Lord Buddha, the entire host was ecstatic, enraptured, astonished, delighted, satisfied, and filled with awe and pleasure. They all bowed down to the Tathāgata, withdrew to one side with palms pressed together, and gazed upon him with fixed attention. The young Licchavi Ratnākara knelt with his right knee on the ground, raised his hands, palms pressed together in salute of the Buddha, and praised him with the following hymn:

Pure are your eyes, broad and beautiful,  
 like the petals of a blue lotus.  
 Pure is your thought, having discovered  
 the supreme transcendence of all trances.  
 Immeasurable is the ocean of your virtues,  
 the accumulation of your good deeds.  
 You affirm the path of peace.  
 O Great Ascetic, obeisance to you!

Leader, bull of men, we behold  
the revelation of your miracle.  
The superb and radiant fields  
of the sugatas appear before us,  
And your extensive spiritual teachings,  
that lead to immortality  
Make themselves heard throughout  
the whole reach of space.

Dharma-King, you rule with the Dharma  
your supreme Dharma-kingdom,  
And thereby bestow the treasures of the  
Dharma upon all living beings.  
Expert in the deep analysis of things,  
you teach their ultimate meaning.  
Sovereign Lord of Dharma, obeisance to you!

All these things arise dependently,  
from causes,  
Yet they are neither existent nor nonexistent.  
Therein is neither ego, nor experiencer,  
nor doer,  
Yet no action, good or evil, loses its effects.  
Such is your teaching.

O Śākyamuni, conquering the powerful host  
of Māra,  
You found peace, immortality, and the  
happiness of that supreme enlightenment,  
Which is not realized by any among  
the outsiders,  
Though they arrest their feeling, thought,  
and mental processes.

O Wonderful King of Dharma,  
You turned the wheel of Dharma before  
men and gods,

With its threefold revolution, its  
manifold aspects,  
Its extreme peace, and its purity  
of nature;  
And thereby the Three Jewels  
were revealed.

Those who are well disciplined by  
your precious Dharma  
Are free of vain imaginings and always  
deeply peaceful.  
Supreme doctor, you put an end to birth,  
decay, sickness, and death.  
Immeasurable ocean of virtue, we bow  
to you!

Like Mount Sumeru, you are unmoved by  
honor or scorn.  
You love moral beings and immoral beings  
equally.  
Poised in equanimity, your mind is like the sky.  
Who would not honor such a precious jewel  
of a being?

Great Sage, in all these multitudes gathered here,  
Who look upon your countenance with hearts  
sincere in faith,  
Each being beholds the Victor, as if just  
before him.  
This is a special quality of the Buddha.

Although the Lord speaks with but one voice,  
Those present perceive that same voice  
differently,  
And each understands in his own language  
according to his own needs.  
This is a special quality of the Buddha.

From the leader's act of speaking in a single  
voice,  
Some merely develop an instinct for the teaching,  
some gain realization,  
Some find pacification of all their doubts.  
This is a special quality of the Buddha.

We bow to you who command the force of  
leadership and the ten powers!  
We bow to you who are dauntless, knowing  
no fear!  
We bow to you, leader of all living beings,  
Who fully manifests the special qualities!

We bow to you who have cut the bondage of  
all fetters!  
We bow to you who, having gone beyond,  
stand on firm ground!  
We bow to you who save the suffering beings!  
We bow to you who do not remain in the  
migrations!

You associate with living beings by frequenting  
their migrations.  
Yet your mind is liberated from all migrations.  
Just as the lotus, born of mud, is not tainted  
thereby,  
So the lotus of the Buddha preserves the  
realization of voidness.

You nullify all signs in all things everywhere.  
You are not subject to any wish for anything  
at all.  
The miraculous power of the buddhas is  
inconceivable.  
We bow to you, who stand nowhere, like  
infinite space.

Then, the young Licchavi Ratnākara, having celebrated the Buddha with these verses, further addressed him: “Lord, these five hundred young Licchavis are truly on their way to unexcelled, perfect enlightenment, and they have asked what is the bodhisattvas’ purification of the buddhafiield. Please, Lord, explain to them the bodhisattvas’ purification of the buddhafiield!”

Upon this request, the Buddha gave his approval to the young Licchavi Ratnākara: “Good, good, young man! Your question to the Tathāgata about the purification of the buddhafiield is indeed good. Therefore, young man, listen well and remember! I will explain to you the purification of the buddhafiield of the bodhisattvas.”

“Very good, Lord,” replied Ratnākara and the five hundred young Licchavis, and they set themselves to listen.

The Buddha said, “Noble sons, a buddhafiield of bodhisattvas is a field of living beings. Why so? A bodhisattva embraces a buddhafiield to the same extent that he causes the development of living beings. He embraces a buddhafiield to the same extent that living beings become disciplined. He embraces a buddhafiield to the same extent that, through entrance into a buddhafiield, living beings are introduced to the buddha-gnosis. He embraces a buddhafiield to the same extent that, through entrance into that buddhafiield, living beings increase their noble spiritual faculties. Why so? Noble son, a buddhafiield of bodhisattvas springs from the aims of living beings.

“For example, Ratnākara, should one wish to build in empty space, one might go ahead in spite of the fact that it is not possible to build or to adorn anything in empty space. In just the same way, should a bodhisattva, who knows full well that all things are like empty space, wish to build a buddhafiield in order to develop living beings, he might go ahead, in spite of the fact that it is not possible to build or to adorn a buddhafiield in empty space.

“Yet, Ratnākara, a bodhisattva’s buddhafiield is a field of positive thought. When he attains enlightenment, living beings free of hypocrisy and deceit will be born in his buddhafiield.

“Noble son, a bodhisattva’s buddhafiield is a field of high resolve. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who have harvested the two stores and have planted the roots of virtue will be born in his buddhafiield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafiield is a field of virtuous application. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who live by all virtuous principles will be born in his buddhafiield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield is the magnificence of the conception of the spirit of enlightenment. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who are actually participating in the Mahāyāna will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield is a field of generosity. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who give away all their possessions will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield is a field of morality. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who follow the path of the ten virtues with positive thoughts will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield is a field of tolerance. When he attains enlightenment, living beings with the transcendences of tolerance, discipline, and the superior trance—hence beautiful with the thirty-two auspicious signs—will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield is a field of effort. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who devote their efforts to virtue will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield is a field of meditation. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who are evenly balanced through mindfulness and awareness will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield is a field of wisdom. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who are destined for the ultimate will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield consists of the four immeasurables. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who live by love, compassion, joy, and impartiality will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield consists of the four means of unification. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who are held together by all the liberations will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield is skill in liberative art. When he attains enlightenment, living beings skilled in all liberative arts and activities will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafield consists of the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who devote their efforts to the four foci of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four bases of magical power, the five spiritual faculties, the five strengths, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the eight branches of the holy path will be born in his buddhafield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafiield is his mind of total dedication. When he attains enlightenment, the ornaments of all virtues will appear in his buddhafiield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafiield is the doctrine that eradicates the eight adversities. When he attains enlightenment, the three bad migrations will cease, and there will be no such thing as the eight adversities in his buddhafiield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafiield consists of his personal observance of the basic precepts and his restraint in blaming others for their transgressions. When he attains enlightenment, even the word ‘crime’ will never be mentioned in his buddhafiield.

“A bodhisattva’s buddhafiield is the purity of the path of the ten virtues. When he attains enlightenment, living beings who are secure in long life, great in wealth, chaste in conduct, enhanced by true speech, soft-spoken, free of divisive intrigues and adroit in reconciling factions, enlightening in their conversations, free of envy, free of malice, and endowed with perfect views will be born in his buddhafiield.

“Thus, noble son, just as is the bodhisattva’s production of the spirit of enlightenment, so is his positive thought. And just as is his positive thought, so is his virtuous application.

“His virtuous application is tantamount to his high resolve, his high resolve is tantamount to his determination, his determination is tantamount to his practice, his practice is tantamount to his total dedication, his total dedication is tantamount to his liberative art, his liberative art is tantamount to his development of living beings, and his development of living beings is tantamount to the purity of his buddhafiield.

“The purity of his buddhafiield reflects the purity of living beings; the purity of the living beings reflects the purity of his gnosis; the purity of his gnosis reflects the purity of his doctrine; the purity of his doctrine reflects the purity of his transcendental practice; and the purity of his transcendental practice reflects the purity of his own mind.”

Thereupon, magically influenced by the Buddha, the venerable Śāriputra had this thought: “If the buddhafiield is pure only to the extent that the mind of the bodhisattva is pure, then, when Śākyamuni Buddha was engaged in the career of the bodhisattva, his mind must have been impure. Otherwise, how could this buddhafiield appear to be so impure?”

The Buddha, aware of venerable Śāriputra’s thoughts, said to him, “What do you think, Śāriputra? Is it because the sun and moon are impure that those blind from birth do not see them?”

Śāriputra replied, “No, Lord. It is not so. The fault lies with those blind from birth, and not with the sun and moon.”

The Buddha declared, “In the same way, Śāriputra, the fact that some living beings do not behold the splendid display of virtues of the buddhafield of the Tathāgata is due to their own ignorance. It is not the fault of the Tathāgata. Śāriputra, the buddhafield of the Tathāgata is pure, but you do not see it.”

Then, the Brahmā Śikhin said to the venerable Śāriputra, “Reverend Śāriputra, do not say that the buddhafield of the Tathāgata is impure. Reverend Śāriputra, the buddhafield of the Tathāgata is pure. I see the splendid expanse of the buddhafield of the Lord Śākyamuni as equal to the splendor of, for example, the abodes of the highest deities.”

Then the venerable Śāriputra said to the Brahmā Śikhin, “As for me, O Brahmā, I see this great earth, with its highs and lows, its thorns, its precipices, its peaks, and its abysses, as if it were entirely filled with ordure.”

Brahmā Śikhin replied, “The fact that you see such a buddhafield as this as if it were so impure, reverend Śāriputra, is a sure sign that there are highs and lows in your mind and that your positive thought in regard to the buddha-gnosis is not pure either. Reverend Śāriputra, those whose minds are impartial toward all living beings and whose positive thoughts toward the buddha-gnosis are pure see this buddhafield as perfectly pure.”

Thereupon the Lord touched the ground of this billion-world-galactic universe with his big toe, and suddenly it was transformed into a huge mass of precious jewels, a magnificent array of many hundreds of thousands of clusters of precious gems, until it resembled the universe of the Tathāgata Ratnavyūha, called Anantagūṇaratnavyūha. Everyone in the entire assembly was filled with wonder, each perceiving himself seated on a throne of jeweled lotuses.

Then, the Buddha said to the venerable Śāriputra, “Śāriputra, do you see this splendor of the virtues of the buddhafield?”

Śāriputra replied, “I see it, Lord! Here before me is a display of splendor such as I never before heard of or beheld!”

The Buddha said, “Śāriputra, this buddhafield is always thus pure, but the Tathāgata makes it appear to be spoiled by many faults, in order to bring about the maturity of inferior living beings. For example, Śāriputra, the gods of the Trayastriṃśa heaven all take their food from a single precious vessel, yet the nectar which nourishes each one differs according to the differences

of the merits each has accumulated. Just so, Śāriputra, living beings born in the same buddha- field see the splendor of the virtues of the buddhafields of the Buddhas according to their own degrees of purity.”

When this splendor of the beauty of the virtues of the buddhafield shone forth, eighty-four thousand beings conceived the spirit of unexcelled perfect enlightenment, and the five hundred Licchavi youths who had accompanied the young Licchavi Ratnākara all attained the conformatory tolerance of ultimate birthlessness.

Then, the Lord withdrew his miraculous power and at once the buddhafield was restored to its usual appearance. Then, both men and gods who subscribed to the disciple vehicle thought, “Alas! All constructed things are impermanent.”

Thereby, thirty-two thousand living beings purified their immaculate, undistorted Dharma-eye in regard to all things. The eight thousand bhikṣus were liberated from their mental defilements, attaining the state of nongrasping. And the eighty-four thousand living beings who were devoted to the grandeur of the buddhafield, having understood that all things are by nature but magical creations, all conceived in their own minds the spirit of unexcelled, totally perfect enlightenment.

## Inconceivable Skill in Liberative Art

At that time, there lived in the great city of Vaiśālī a certain Licchavi, Vimalakīrti by name. Having served the ancient buddhas, he had generated the roots of virtue by honoring them and making offerings to them. He had attained tolerance as well as eloquence. He played with the great superknowledges. He had attained the power of incantations and the fearlessnesses. He had conquered all demons and opponents. He had penetrated the profound way of the Dharma. He was liberated through the transcendence of wisdom. Having integrated his realization with skill in liberative art, he was expert in knowing the thoughts and actions of living beings. Knowing the strength or weakness of their faculties, and being gifted with unrivaled eloquence, he taught the Dharma appropriately to each. Having applied himself energetically to the Mahāyāna, he understood it and accomplished his tasks with great finesse. He lived with the deportment of a buddha, and his superior intelligence was as wide as an ocean. He was praised, honored, and commended by all the buddhas and was respected by Indra, Brahmā, and all the Lokapālas. In order to develop living beings with his skill in liberative art, he lived in the great city of Vaiśālī.

His wealth was inexhaustible for the purpose of sustaining the poor and the helpless. He observed a pure morality in order to protect the immoral. He maintained tolerance and self-control in order to reconcile beings who were angry, cruel, violent, and brutal. He blazed with energy in order to inspire people who were lazy. He maintained concentration, mindfulness, and meditation in order to sustain the mentally troubled. He attained decisive wisdom in order to sustain the foolish.

He wore the white clothes of the layman, yet lived impeccably like a religious devotee. He lived at home, but remained aloof from the realm of desire, the realm of pure matter, and the immaterial realm. He had a son, a wife, and female attendants, yet always maintained continence. He appeared to be surrounded by servants, yet lived in solitude. He appeared to be adorned with ornaments, yet always was endowed with the auspicious signs and marks. He seemed to eat and drink, yet always took nourishment from the taste of meditation. He made his appearance at the fields of sports and in the casinos, but his aim was

always to mature those people who were attached to games and gambling. He visited the fashionable outsider teachers, yet always kept unswerving loyalty to the Buddha. He understood the mundane and transcendental sciences and esoteric practices, yet always took pleasure in the delights of the Dharma. He mixed in all crowds, yet was respected as foremost of all.

In order to be in harmony with people, he associated with elders, with those of middle age, and with the young, yet always spoke in harmony with the Dharma. He engaged in all sorts of businesses, yet had no interest in profit or possessions. To educate living beings, he would appear at crossroads and on street corners, and to protect them he participated in government. To turn people away from the individual vehicle and to engage them in the Mahāyāna, he appeared among listeners and teachers of the Dharma. To develop children, he visited all the schools. To demonstrate the evils of desire, he even entered the brothels. To establish drunkards in correct mindfulness, he entered all the drinking-houses.

He was honored as the merchant among merchants because he demonstrated the priority of the Dharma. He was honored as the landlord among landlords because he renounced the aggressiveness of ownership. He was honored as the warrior among warriors because he cultivated endurance, determination, and fortitude. He was honored as the brahmin among brahmins because he suppressed pride, vanity, and arrogance. He was honored as the official among officials because he regulated the functions of government according to the Dharma. He was honored as the prince of princes because he reversed their attachment to royal pleasures and sovereign power. He was honored as a chamberlain in the royal harem because he brought the young ladies to spiritual maturity.

He was compatible with ordinary people because he appreciated the excellence of ordinary merits. He was honored as the Indra among Indras because he showed them the temporality of their lordship. He was honored as the Brahmā among Brahmās because he showed them the special excellence of gnosis. He was honored as the Lokapāla among Lokapālas because he fostered the development of all living beings.

Thus lived the Licchavi Vimalakīrti in the great city of Vaiśālī, endowed with an infinite knowledge of skill in liberative arts.

At that time, out of this very skill in liberative art, Vimalakīrti manifested himself as if sick. To inquire after his health, the king, the officials, the lords,

the youths, the brahmins, the householders, the businessmen, the townfolk, the countryfolk, and thousands of other living beings came forth from the great city of Vaiśālī and called on the invalid. When they arrived, Vimalakīrti taught them the Dharma, beginning his discourse from the actuality of the four main elements:

“Friends, this body is so impermanent, fragile, unworthy of confidence, and feeble. It is so insubstantial, perishable, short-lived, painful, filled with diseases, and subject to changes. Thus, my friends, as this body is only a vessel of many sicknesses, wise men do not rely on it. This body is like a ball of foam, unable to bear any pressure. It is like a water bubble, not remaining very long. It is like a mirage, born from the appetites of the passions. It is like the trunk of the plantain tree, having no core. Alas! This body is like a machine, a nexus of bones and tendons. It is like a magical illusion, consisting of falsifications. It is like a dream, being an unreal vision. It is like a reflection, being the image of former actions. It is like an echo, being dependent on conditioning. It is like a cloud, being characterized by turbulence and dissolution. It is like a flash of lightning, being unstable, and decaying every moment. The body is ownerless, being the product of a variety of conditions.

“This body is inert, like the earth; selfless, like water; lifeless, like fire; impersonal, like the wind; and nonsubstantial, like space. This body is unreal, being a collocation of the four main elements. It is void, not existing as self or as self-possessed. It is inanimate, being like grass, trees, walls, clods of earth, and illusions. It is insensate, being driven like a windmill. It is filthy, being an agglomeration of pus and excrement. It is false, being fated to be broken and destroyed, in spite of being anointed and massaged. It is afflicted by the four hundred and four diseases. It is like an ancient well, constantly overwhelmed by old age. Its duration is never certain—certain only is its end in death. This body is a combination of aggregates, elements, and sense-media, which are comparable to murderers, poisonous snakes, and an empty town, respectively. Therefore, you should be repelled by such a body. You should despair of it and should arouse your admiration for the body of the Tathāgata.

“Friends, the body of a tathāgata is the body of Dharma, born of gnosis. The body of a tathāgata is born of the stores of merit and wisdom. It is born of morality, of concentration, of wisdom, of the liberations, and of the knowledge and vision of liberation. It is born of love, compassion, joy, and impartiality. It is born of charity, discipline, and self-control. It is born of the path of

ten virtues. It is born of patience and gentleness. It is born of the roots of virtue planted by solid efforts. It is born of the concentrations, the liberations, the meditations, and the absorptions. It is born of learning, wisdom, and liberative art. It is born of the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment. It is born of mental quiescence and transcendental analysis. It is born of the ten powers, the four fearlessnesses, and the eighteen special qualities. It is born of all the transcendences. It is born from sciences and superknowledges. It is born of the abandonment of all evil qualities, and of the gathering of all good qualities. It is born of truth. It is born of reality. It is born of conscious awareness.

“Friends, the body of a tathāgata is born of innumerable good works. Toward such a body you should turn your aspirations, and, in order to eliminate the sicknesses of the passions of all living beings, you should conceive the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.”

While the Licchavi Vimalakīrti thus taught the Dharma to those who had come to inquire about his sickness, many hundreds of thousands of living beings conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.

### **The Disciples' and the Bodhisattvas' Reluctance to Visit Vimalakīrti**

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti thought to himself, "I am sick, lying on my bed in pain, yet the Tathāgata, the arhat, the perfectly accomplished Buddha, does not consider me or take pity upon me, and sends no one to inquire after my illness."

The Lord knew this thought in the mind of Vimalakīrti and said to the venerable Śāriputra, "Śāriputra, go to inquire after the illness of the Licchavi Vimalakīrti."

Thus addressed, the venerable Śāriputra answered the Buddha, "Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to ask the Licchavi Vimalakīrti about his illness. Why? I remember one day, when I was sitting at the foot of a tree in the forest, absorbed in contemplation, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came to the foot of that tree and said to me, 'Reverend Śāriputra, this is not the way to absorb yourself in contemplation. You should absorb yourself in contemplation so that neither body nor mind appear anywhere in the three realms. You should absorb yourself in contemplation in such a way that you can manifest all ordinary behavior without forsaking cessation. You should absorb yourself in contemplation in such a way that you can manifest the nature of an ordinary person without abandoning your cultivated spiritual nature. You should absorb yourself in contemplation so that the mind neither settles within nor moves without toward external forms. You should absorb yourself in contemplation in such a way that the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment are manifest without deviation toward any convictions. You should absorb yourself in contemplation in such a way that you are released in liberation without abandoning the passions that are the province of the world.

"Reverend Śāriputra, those who absorb themselves in contemplation in such a way are declared by the Lord to be truly absorbed in contemplation.'

"Lord, when I heard this teaching, I was unable to reply and remained silent. Therefore, I am reluctant to go to ask that good man about his sickness."

Then, the Buddha said to the venerable Mahāmaudgalyāna, "Maudgalyāna, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness."

Maudgalyāyana replied, “Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness. Why? I remember one day when I was teaching the Dharma to the householders in a square in the great city of Vaiśālī, and the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came along and said to me, ‘Reverend Maudgalyāyana, that is not the way to teach the Dharma to the householders in their white clothes. The Dharma must be taught according to reality.

“Reverend Maudgalyāyana, the Dharma is without a living being, because it is free of the dust of living beings. It is selfless, because it is free of the dust of desire. It is lifeless, because it is free of birth and death. It is without a person, because it dispenses with past origins and future destinies.

“The Dharma is peace and pacification, because it is free from desire. It does not become an object, because it is free of words and letters; it is inexpressible, and it transcends all movement of mind.

“The Dharma is omnipresent, because it is like infinite space. It is without color, mark, or shape, because it is free of all process. It is without the concept of “mine,” because it is free of the habitual notion of possession. It is without ideation, because it is free of mind, thought, or consciousness. It is incomparable, because it has no antithesis. It is without presumption of conditionality, because it does not conform to causes.

“It permeates evenly all things, because all are included in the ultimate realm. It conforms to reality by means of the process of nonconformity. It abides at the reality-limit, for it is utterly without fluctuation. It is immovable, because it is independent of the six objects of sense. It is without coming and going, for it never stands still. It is comprised by voidness; is remarkable through signlessness; and because of wishlessness is free of presumption and repudiation. It is without establishment and rejection, without birth or destruction. It is without any fundamental consciousness, transcending the range of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and thought. It is without highness and lowness. It abides without movement or activity.

“Reverend Mahāmaudgalyāyana, how could there be a teaching in regard to such a Dharma? Reverend Mahāmaudgalyāyana, even the expression “to teach the Dharma” is presumptuous, and those who listen to it listen to presumption. Reverend Maudgalyāyana, where there are no presumptuous words, there is no teacher of the Dharma, no one to listen, and no one to understand. It is as if an illusory person were to teach the Dharma to illusory people.

“Therefore, you should teach the Dharma by keeping your mind on this. You should be adept in regard to the spiritual faculties of living beings. By means of the correct vision of the wisdom-eye, manifesting the great compassion, acknowledging the benevolent activity of the Buddha, purifying your intentions, understanding the definitive expressions of the Dharma, you should teach the Dharma in order that the continuity of the Three Jewels may never be interrupted.’

“Lord, when Vimalakīrti had discoursed thus, eight hundred householders in the crowd conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment, and I myself was speechless. Therefore, Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to this good man to inquire about his illness.”

Then, the Buddha said to the venerable Mahākāśyapa, “Mahākāśyapa, you go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

“Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness. Why? I remember one day, when I was in the street of the poor begging for my food, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came along and said to me, ‘Reverend Mahākāśyapa, to avoid the houses of the wealthy, and to favor the houses of the poor—this is partiality in benevolence. Reverend Mahākāśyapa, you should dwell on the fact of the equality of things, and you should seek alms with consideration for all living beings at all times. You should beg your food in awareness of the ultimate nonexistence of food. You should seek alms for the sake of eliminating the materialism of others. When you enter a town, you should keep in mind its actual voidness, yet you should proceed through it in order to develop men and women. You should enter homes as if entering the family of the Buddha. You should accept alms by not taking anything. You should see form like a man blind from birth, hear sounds as if they were echoes, smell scents as if they were winds, experience tastes without any discrimination, touch tangibles in awareness of the ultimate lack of contact in gnosis, and know things with the consciousness of an illusory creature. That which is without intrinsic substance and without imparted substance does not burn. And what does not burn will not be extinguished.

“Elder Mahākāśyapa, if, equipoised in the eight liberations without transcending the eight perverse paths, you can enter the sameness of reality by means of the sameness of perversity, and if you can make a gift to all living beings and an offering to all the noble ones and buddhas out of even a

single measure of alms, then you yourself may eat. Thus, when you eat, after offering, you should be neither affected by afflictions nor free of afflictions, neither involved in concentration nor free from concentration, neither living in the world nor abiding in liberation. Furthermore, those who give such alms, reverend, have neither great merit nor small merit, neither gain nor loss. They should follow the way of the buddhas, not the way of the disciples. Only in this way, Elder Mahākāśyapa, is the practice of eating by alms meaningful.'

"Lord, when I heard this teaching, I was astonished and thought: 'Reverence to all bodhisattvas! If a lay bodhisattva may be endowed with such eloquence, who is there who would not conceive the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment?' From that time forth, I no longer recommend the vehicles of the disciples and of the solitary sages but recommend the Mahāyāna. And thus, Lord, I am reluctant to go to this good man to inquire about his illness."

Then, the Buddha said to the venerable Subhūti, "Subhūti, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness."

Subhūti replied, "Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to this good man to inquire about his illness. Why? My Lord, I remember one day, when I went to beg my food at the house of the Licchavi Vimalakīrti in the great city of Vaiśālī, he took my bowl and filled it with some excellent food and said to me, 'Reverend Subhūti, take this food if you understand the sameness of all things through the sameness of material objects, and if you understand the sameness of the qualities of the Buddha through the sameness of all things. Take this food if, without abandoning desire, hatred, and folly, you can avoid association with them; if you can follow the path of the single way without ever disturbing the egoistic views; if, neither conquering ignorance and the craving for existence, nor producing knowledge and liberation, your liberation being the same as the equality of the uninterrupted sins, you are neither liberated nor bound; if you do not see the four noble truths, yet are not one who "has not seen the truth;" if you are also neither "one who has attained fruition," nor "an ordinary person," while not having eliminated the qualities of "an ordinary person;" if you are not a noble one, and not a non-noble one; if, though you are in the presence of all things, you are free of any notion of "all things."

"Take this food, reverend Subhūti, if, without seeing the Buddha, hearing the Dharma, or serving the Saṅgha, you undertake the religious

life under the six outsider masters; namely, Purāṇa Kāśyapa, Māskārin Gośālīputra, Saṃjāyin Vairāṭīputra, Kakuda Kātyāyana, Ajita Keśakambala, and Nirgrantha Jñātīputra, and follow the ways they prescribe.

“Take this food, reverend Subhūti, if, entertaining all false views, you find neither extremes nor middle; if, bound up in the eight adversities, you do not obtain favorable conditions; if, assimilating the passions, you do not attain purification; if the dispassion of all living beings is your dispassion, reverend; if those who make offerings to you are not thereby purified; if those who offer you food, reverend, still fall into the three bad migrations; if you associate with all Māras; if you entertain all passions; if the nature of passions is the nature of a reverend; if you have hostile feelings toward all living beings; if you despise all the buddhas; if you criticize all the teachings of the Buddha; if you do not rely on the Saṅgha; and finally, if you never enter ultimate liberation.’

“Lord, when I heard these words of the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, I wondered what I should say and what I should do, but I was totally in the dark. Leaving the bowl, I was about to leave the house when the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to me, ‘Reverend Subhūti, do not fear these words, and pick up your bowl. What do you think, reverend Subhūti? If it were an incarnation created by the Tathāgata who spoke thus to you, would you be afraid?’

“I answered, ‘No indeed, noble sir!’ He then said, ‘Reverend Subhūti, the nature of all things is like illusion, like a magical incarnation. So you should not fear them. Why? All words also have that nature, and thus the wise are not attached to words, nor do they fear them. Why? All language does not ultimately exist, except as liberation. The nature of all things is liberation.’

“When Vimalakīrti had discoursed in this way, two hundred gods obtained the pure doctrinal vision in regard to all things, without obscurity or defilement, and five hundred gods obtained the conformative tolerance. As for me, I was speechless and unable to respond to him. Therefore, Lord, I am reluctant to go to this good man to inquire about his illness.”

Then, the Buddha said to the venerable Pūrṇamaitrāyaṇīputra, “Pūrṇa, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

Pūrṇa replied, “Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to this good man to inquire about his illness. Why? Lord, I remember one day, when I was teaching the Dharma to some young monks in the great forest, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came there and said to me, ‘Reverend Pūrṇa, first concentrate yourself, regard

the minds of these young bhikṣus, and then teach them the Dharma! Do not put rotten food into a jeweled bowl! First understand the inclinations of these monks, and do not confuse priceless sapphires with glass beads!

“Reverend Pūrṇa, without examining the spiritual faculties of living beings, do not presume upon the one-sidedness of their faculties; do not wound those who are without wounds; do not impose a narrow path upon those who aspire to a great path; do not try to pour the great ocean into the hoof-print of an ox; do not try to put Mount Sumeru into a grain of mustard; do not confuse the brilliance of the sun with the light of a glowworm; and do not expose those who admire the roar of a lion to the howl of a jackal!

“Reverend Pūrṇa, all these monks were formerly engaged in the Mahāyāna but have forgotten the spirit of enlightenment. So do not instruct them in the disciple vehicle. The disciple vehicle is not ultimately valid, and you disciples are like men blind from birth, in regard to recognition of the degrees of the spiritual faculties of living beings.’

“At that moment, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti entered into such a concentration that those monks were caused to remember their various former lives, in which they had produced the roots of virtue by serving five hundred buddhas for the sake of perfect enlightenment. As soon as their own spirits of enlightenment had become clear to them, they bowed at the feet of that good man and pressed their palms together in reverence. He taught them the Dharma, and they all attained the stage of irreversibility from unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. It occurred to me then, ‘The disciples, who do not know the thoughts or the inclinations of others, are not able to teach the Dharma to anyone. Why? These disciples are not expert in discerning the superiority and inferiority of the spiritual faculties of living beings, and they are not always in a state of concentration like the Tathāgata, the arhat, the perfectly accomplished Buddha.’ Therefore, Lord, I am reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his health.”

The Buddha then said to the venerable Mahākātyāyana, “Kātyāyana, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

Kātyāyana replied, “Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness. Why? Lord, I remember one day when, after the Lord had given some brief instruction to the monks, I was defining the expressions of that discourse by teaching the meaning of impermanence, suffering, selflessness, and peace; the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came there

and said to me, ‘Reverend Mahākātyāyana, do not teach an ultimate reality endowed with activity, production, and destruction! Reverend Mahākātyāyana, nothing was ever destroyed, is destroyed, or will ever be destroyed. Such is the meaning of “impermanence.” The meaning of the realization of birthlessness, through the realization of the voidness of the five aggregates, is the meaning of “suffering.” The fact of the nonduality of self and selflessness is the meaning of “selflessness.” That which has no intrinsic substance and no other sort of substance does not burn, and what does not burn is not extinguished; such lack of extinction is the meaning of “peace.”’

“When he had discoursed thus, the minds of the monks were liberated from their defilements and entered a state of nongrasping. Therefore, Lord, I am reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness.”

The Buddha then said to the venerable Aniruddha, “Aniruddha, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

“My Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness. Why? I remember, Lord, one day when I was taking a walk, the great Brahmā named Śubhavyūha and the ten thousand other Brahmās who accompanied him illuminated the place with their radiance and, having bowed their heads at my feet, withdrew to one side and asked me, ‘Reverend Aniruddha, you have been proclaimed by the Buddha to be the foremost among those who possess the divine eye. To what distance does the divine vision of the venerable Aniruddha extend?’ I answered, ‘Friends, I see the entire billion-world-galactic universe of the Lord Śākyamuni just as plainly as a man of ordinary vision sees a myrobalan nut on the palm of his hand.’ When I had said these words, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came there and, having bowed his head at my feet, said to me, ‘Reverend Aniruddha, is your divine eye compounded in nature? Or is it un-compounded in nature? If it is compounded in nature, it is the same as the superknowledges of the outsiders. If it is un-compounded in nature, then it is not constructed and, as such, is incapable of seeing. Then, how do you see, O elder?’

“At these words, I became speechless, and Brahmā also was amazed to hear this teaching from that good man. Having bowed to him, he said, ‘Who then, in the world, possesses the divine eye?’

“Vimalakīrti answered, ‘In the world, it is the buddhas who have the divine eye. They see all the buddhafi elds without even leaving their state of concentration and without being affected by duality.’

“Having heard these words, the ten thousand Brahmās were inspired with high resolve and conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. Having paid homage and respect both to me and to that good man, they disappeared. As for me, I remained speechless, and therefore I am reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness.”

The Buddha then said to the venerable Upāli, “Upāli, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

Upāli replied, “Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness. Why? Lord, I remember that one day there were two monks who had committed some infraction and were too ashamed to appear before the Lord, so they came to me and said, ‘Reverend Upāli, we have both committed an infraction but are too ashamed to appear before the Buddha. Venerable Upāli, kindly remove our anxieties by absolving us of these infractions.’

“Lord, while I was giving those two monks some religious discourse, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came there and said to me, ‘Reverend Upāli, do not aggravate further the sins of these two monks. Without perplexing them, relieve their remorse. Reverend Upāli, sin is not to be apprehended within, or without, or between the two. Why? The Buddha has said, “Living beings are afflicted by the passions of thought, and they are purified by the purification of thought.”

“Reverend Upāli, the mind is neither within nor without, nor is it to be apprehended between the two. Sin is just the same as the mind, and all things are just the same as sin. They do not escape this same reality.

“Reverend Upāli, this nature of the mind, by virtue of which your mind, reverend, is liberated—does it ever become afflicted?”

“Never,” I replied.

“Reverend Upāli, the minds of all living beings have that very nature. Reverend Upāli, conceptualization is total affliction, and not conceptualizing and not discriminating is their true nature. Misapprehension is total affliction, and non-misapprehension is their true nature. The presumption of self is total affliction, and selflessness is their true nature. Reverend Upāli, all things are without production, destruction, and duration, like magical illusions, clouds, and lightning; all things are evanescent, not remaining even for an instant; all things are like dreams, hallucinations, and unreal visions; all things are like the reflection of the moon in water and like a

mirror-image; they are born of mental construction. Those who know this are called the true upholders of the discipline, and those disciplined in that way are indeed well disciplined.’ ”

“Then the two monks said, ‘This householder is extremely well endowed with wisdom. The reverend Upāli, who was proclaimed by the Lord as the foremost of the upholders of the discipline, is not his equal.’

“I then said to the two monks, ‘Do not entertain the notion that he is a mere householder! Why? With the exception of the Tathāgata himself, there is no disciple or bodhisattva capable of competing with his eloquence or rivaling the brilliance of his wisdom.’

“Thereupon, the two monks, delivered from their anxieties and inspired with a high resolve, conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. Bowing down to that good man, they made the wish: ‘May all living beings attain eloquence such as this!’ Therefore, I am reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness.”

The Buddha then said to the venerable Rāhula, “Rāhula, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

Rāhula replied, “Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness. Why? Lord, I remember that one day many young Licchavi gentlemen came to the place where I was and said to me, ‘Reverend Rāhula, you are the son of the Lord, and, having renounced a kingdom of a universal monarch, you have left the world. What are the virtues and benefits you saw in leaving the world?’

“As I was teaching them properly the benefits and virtues of renouncing the world, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came there and, having greeted me, said, ‘Reverend Rāhula, you should not teach the benefits and virtues of renunciation in the way that you do. Why? Renunciation is itself the very absence of virtues and benefits. Reverend Rāhula, one may speak of benefits and virtues in regard to compounded things, but renunciation is uncompounded, and there can be no question of benefits and virtues in regard to the uncompounded. Reverend Rāhula, renunciation is not material but is free of matter. It is free of the extreme Views of beginning and end. It is the path of liberation. It is praised by the wise, embraced by the noble ones, and causes the defeat of all Māras. It liberates from the five states of existence, purifies the five eyes, cultivates the five powers, and supports the five spiritual faculties. Renunciation is totally harmless to others and is not adulterated with evil things. It disciplines the outsiders, transcending all

denominations. It is the bridge over the swamp of desire, without grasping, and free of the habits of “I” and “mine.” It is without attachment and without disturbance, eliminating all commotion. It disciplines one’s own mind and protects the minds of others. It favors mental quiescence and stimulates transcendental analysis. It is irreproachable in all respects and so is called renunciation. Those who leave the mundane in this way are called “truly renunciants.” Young men, renounce the world in the light of this clear teaching! The appearance of the Buddha is extremely rare. Human life endowed with leisure and opportunity is very hard to obtain. To be a human being is very precious.’

“The young men complained: ‘But, householder, we have heard the Tathāgata declare that one should not renounce the world without the permission of one’s parents.’

“Vimalakīrti answered: ‘Young men, you should cultivate yourselves intensively to conceive the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. That in itself will be your renunciation and high ordination!’

“Thereupon, thirty-two of the Licchavi youths conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. Therefore, Lord, I am reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness.”

The Buddha then said to the venerable Ānanda, “Ānanda, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

Ānanda replied, “Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness. Why? Lord, I remember one day when the body of the Lord manifested some indisposition and he required some milk; I took the bowl and went to the door of the mansion of a great Brahmān family. The Licchavi Vimalakīrti came there, and, having saluted me, said, ‘Reverend Ānanda, what are you doing on the threshold of this house with your bowl in your hand so early in the morning?’

“I replied: ‘The body of the Lord manifests some indisposition, and he needs some milk. Therefore, I have come to fetch some.’

“Vimalakīrti then said to me, ‘Reverend Ānanda, do not say such a thing! Reverend Ānanda, the body of the Tathāgata is tough as a diamond, having eliminated all the instinctual traces of evil and being endowed with all goodness. How could disease or discomfort affect such a body?’

“‘Reverend Ānanda, go in silence, and do not belittle the Lord. Do not say such things to others. It would not be good for the powerful gods or for

the bodhisattvas coming from the various buddhafiels to hear such words.

“Reverend Ānanda, a universal monarch, who is endowed only with a small root of virtue, is free of diseases. How then could the Lord, who has an infinite root of virtue, have any disease? It is impossible.

“Reverend Ānanda, do not bring shame upon us, but go in silence, lest the outsider sectarians should hear your words. They would say, “For shame! The teacher of these people cannot even cure his own sicknesses. How then can he cure the sicknesses of others?” Reverend Ānanda, go then discreetly so that no one observes you.

“Reverend Ānanda, the Tathāgatas have the body of the Dharma—not a body that is sustained by material food. The Tathāgatas have a transcendental body that has transcended all mundane qualities. There is no injury to the body of a Tathāgata, as it is rid of all defilements. The body of a Tathāgata is uncompounded and free of all formative activity. Reverend Ānanda, to believe there can be illness in such a body is irrational and unseemly!

“When I had heard these words, I wondered if I had previously misheard and misunderstood the Buddha, and I was very much ashamed. Then I heard a voice from the sky: ‘Ānanda! The householder speaks to you truly. Nevertheless, since the Buddha has appeared during the time of the five corruptions, he disciplines living beings by acting lowly and humble. Therefore, Ānanda, do not be ashamed, and go and get the milk!’

“Lord, such was my conversation with the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, and therefore I am reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness.”

In the same way, the rest of the five hundred disciples were reluctant to go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, and each told the Buddha his own adventure, recounting all his conversations with the Licchavi Vimalakīrti.

Then, the Buddha said to the bodhisattva Maitreya, “Maitreya, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

Maitreya replied, “Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness. Why? Lord, I remember that one day I was engaged in a conversation with the gods of the Tuṣita heaven, the god Saṃtuṣita and his retinue, about the stage of nonregression of the great bodhisattvas. At that time, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came there and addressed me as follows:

“Maitreya, the Buddha has prophesied that only one more birth stands between you and unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. What kind of birth does

this prophecy concern, Maitreya? Is it past? Is it future? Or is it present? If it is a past birth, it is already finished. If it is a future birth, it will never arrive. If it is a present birth, it does not abide. For the Buddha has declared, “Bhikṣus, in a single moment, you are born, you age, you die, you transmigrate, and you are reborn.”

“Then might the prophecy concern birthlessness? But birthlessness applies to the stage of destiny for the ultimate, in which there is neither prophecy nor attainment of perfect enlightenment.

“Therefore, Maitreya, is your reality from birth? Or is it from cessation? Your reality as prophesied is not born and does not cease, nor will it be born nor will it cease. Furthermore, your reality is just the same as the reality of all living beings, the reality of all things, and the reality of all the holy ones. If your enlightenment can be prophesied in such a way, so can that of all living beings. Why? Because reality does not consist of duality or of diversity. Maitreya, whenever you attain buddhahood, which is the perfection of enlightenment, at the same time all living beings will also attain buddhahood. Why? Enlightenment consists of the realizations of all living beings. Maitreya, at the moment when you attain ultimate liberation, all living beings will also attain ultimate liberation. Why? The Tathāgatas do not enter ultimate liberation until all living beings have entered ultimate liberation. For, since all living beings are utterly liberated, the Tathāgatas see them as having the nature of ultimate liberation.

“Therefore, Maitreya, do not fool and delude these deities! No-one abides in, or regresses from, enlightenment. Maitreya, you should introduce these deities to the repudiation of all discriminative constructions concerning enlightenment.

“Enlightenment is perfectly realized neither by the body nor by the mind. Enlightenment is the eradication of all marks. Enlightenment is free of presumptions concerning all objects. Enlightenment is free of the functioning of all intentional thoughts. Enlightenment is the annihilation of all convictions. Enlightenment is free from all discriminative constructions. Enlightenment is free from all vacillation, mentation, and agitation. Enlightenment is not involved in any commitments. Enlightenment is the arrival at detachment, through freedom from all habitual attitudes. The ground of enlightenment is the ultimate realm. Enlightenment is realization of reality. Enlightenment abides at the reality-limit. Enlightenment is without duality, since therein are no minds and no things. Enlightenment is

equality, since it is equal to infinite space.

“Enlightenment is unconstructed, because it is neither born nor destroyed, neither abides nor undergoes any transformation. Enlightenment is the complete knowledge of the thoughts, deeds, and inclinations of all living beings. Enlightenment is not a door for the sense-media. Enlightenment is unadulterated, since it is free of the passions of the instinctually driven succession of lives. Enlightenment is neither somewhere nor nowhere, abiding in no location or dimension. Enlightenment, not being contained in anything, does not stand in reality. Enlightenment is merely a name and even that name is motionless. Enlightenment, free of abstention and undertaking, is energyless. There is no agitation in enlightenment, as it is utterly pure by nature. Enlightenment is radiance, pure in essence. Enlightenment is without subjectivity and completely without object. Enlightenment, which penetrates the equality of all things, is undifferentiated. Enlightenment, which is not shown by any example, is incomparable. Enlightenment is subtle, since it is extremely difficult to realize. Enlightenment is all-pervasive, as it has the nature of infinite space. Enlightenment cannot be realized, either physically or mentally. Why? The body is like grass, trees, walls, paths, and optical illusions. And the mind is immaterial, invisible, baseless, and unconscious.’

“Lord, when Vimalakīrti had discoursed thus, two hundred of the deities in that assembly attained the tolerance of the birthlessness of things. As for me, Lord, I was rendered speechless. Therefore, I am reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness.”

The Buddha then said to the young Licchavi Prabhāvyūha, “Prabhāvyūha, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

Prabhāvyūha replied, “Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness. Why? Lord, I remember one day, when I was going out of the great city of Vaiśālī, I met the Licchavi Vimalakīrti coming in. He greeted me, and I then addressed him: ‘Householder, where do you come from?’ He replied, ‘I come from the seat of enlightenment.’ I then inquired, ‘What is meant by “seat of enlightenment”?’ He then spoke the following words to me, ‘Noble son, the seat of enlightenment is the seat of positive thought because it is without artificiality. It is the seat of effort, because it releases energetic activities. It is the seat of high resolve, because its insight is superior. It is the seat of the great spirit of enlightenment, because

it does not neglect anything.

“It is the seat of generosity, because it has no expectation of reward. It is the seat of morality, because it fulfills all commitments. It is the seat of tolerance, because it is free of anger toward any living being. It is the seat of effort, because it does not turn back. It is the seat of meditation, because it generates fitness of mind. It is the seat of wisdom, because it sees everything directly.

“It is the seat of love, because it is equal to all living beings. It is the seat of compassion, because it tolerates all injuries. It is the seat of joy, because it is joyfully devoted to the bliss of the Dharma. It is the seat of equanimity, because it abandons affection and aversion.

“It is the seat of paranormal perception, because it has the six superknowledges. It is the seat of liberation, because it does not intellectualize. It is the seat of liberative art, because it develops living beings. It is the seat of the means of unification, because it brings together living beings. It is the seat of learning, because it makes practice of the essence. It is the seat of decisiveness, because of its precise discrimination. It is the seat of the aids to enlightenment, because it eliminates the duality of the compounded and the uncompounded. It is the seat of truth, because it does not deceive anyone.

“It is the seat of interdependent origination, because it proceeds from the exhaustion of ignorance to the exhaustion of old age and death. It is the seat of eradication of all afflictions, because it is perfectly enlightened about the nature of reality. It is the seat of all living beings, because all living beings are without intrinsic identity. It is the seat of all things, because it is perfectly enlightened with regard to voidness.

“It is the seat of the conquest of all devils, because it never flinches. It is the seat of the triple world, because it is free of involvement. It is the seat of the heroism that sounds the lion's roar, because it is free of fear and trembling. It is the seat of the strengths, the fearlessnesses, and all the special qualities of the Buddha, because it is irreproachable in all respects. It is the seat of the three knowledges, because in it no passions remain. It is the seat of instantaneous, total understanding of all things, because it realizes fully the gnosis of omniscience.

“Noble son, when bodhisattvas are thus endowed with the transcendences, the roots of virtue, the ability to develop living beings, and the incorporation of the holy Dharma, whether they lift up their feet or put them down, they all come from the seat of enlightenment. They come from the qualities of the

Buddha, and stand on the qualities of the Buddha.’

“Lord, when Vimalakīrti had explained this teaching, five hundred gods and men conceived the spirit of enlightenment, and I became speechless. Therefore, Lord, I am reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness.”

The Buddha then said to the bodhisattva Jagatindhara, “Jagatindhara, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

“Jagatindhara replied, “Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness. Why? Lord, I remember that one day, when I was at home, the wicked Māra, disguised as Indra and surrounded with twelve thousand heavenly maidens, approached me with the sounds of music and singing. Having saluted me by touching my feet with his head, he withdrew with his retinue to one side. I then, thinking he was Śakra, the king of the gods, said to him, ‘Welcome, O Kauśikā! You should remain consciously aware in the midst of the pleasures of desire. You should often think on impermanence and strive to utilize the essential in body, life, and wealth.’

“Māra then said to me, ‘Good sir, accept from me these twelve thousand divine maidens and make them your servants.’

“I replied, ‘O Kauśikā, do not offer me, who am religious and a son of the Śākya, things which are not appropriate. It is not proper for me to have these maidens.’

“No sooner had I said these words than the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came there and said to me, ‘Noble son, do not think that this is Indra! This is not Indra but the evil Māra, who has come to ridicule you.’

“Then the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to Māra, ‘Evil Māra, since these heavenly maidens are not suitable for this religious devotee, a son of the Śākya, give them to me.’

“Then Māra was terrified and distressed, thinking that the Licchavi Vimalakīrti had come to expose him. He tried to make himself invisible, but, try as he might with all his magical powers, he could not vanish from sight. Then a voice resounded in the sky, saying, ‘Evil One, give these heavenly maidens to the good man Vimalakīrti, and only then will you be able to return to your own abode.’

“Then Māra was even more frightened and, much against his will, gave the heavenly maidens.

“The Licchavi Vimalakīrti, having received the goddesses, said to them,

‘Now that you have been given to me by Māra, you should all conceive the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.’

“He then exhorted them with discourse suitable for their development toward enlightenment, and soon they conceived the spirit of enlightenment. He then said to them, ‘You have just conceived the spirit of enlightenment. From now on, you should devote yourselves to find joy in pleasures of the Dharma, and should take no pleasure in desires.’

“They then asked him, ‘What is “joy in the pleasures of the Dharma”?’

“He declared, ‘It is the joy of unbreakable faith in the Buddha, of wishing to hear the Dharma, of serving the Saṅgha and honoring the spiritual benefactors without pride. It is the joy of renunciation of the whole world, of not being fixed in objects, of considering the five aggregates to be like murderers, of considering the elements to be like venomous serpents, and of considering the sense-media to be like an empty town. It is the joy of always guarding the spirit of enlightenment, of helping living beings, of sharing through generosity, of not slackening in morality, of control and tolerance in patience, of thorough cultivation of virtue by effort, of total absorption in meditation, and of absence of afflictions in wisdom. It is the joy of extending enlightenment, of conquering the Māras, of destroying the afflictions, and of purifying the buddhafield. It is the joy of accumulating all virtues, in order to cultivate the auspicious marks and signs. It is the joy of the liberation of non-intimidation when hearing the profound teaching. It is the joy of exploration of the three doors of liberation, and of the realization of liberation. It is the joy of being an ornament of the seat of enlightenment, and of not attaining liberation at the wrong time. It is the joy of serving those of equal fortune, of not hating or resenting those of superior fortune, of serving the spiritual benefactors, and of avoiding sinful friends. It is the joy of the superior gladness of faith and devotion to the Dharma. It is the joy of acquiring liberative arts and of the conscious cultivation of the aids to enlightenment. Thus, the bodhisattva admires and finds joy in the delights of the Dharma.’

“Thereupon, Māra said to the goddesses, ‘Now come along and let us return home.’

“They said, ‘You gave us to this householder. Now we should enjoy the delights of the Dharma and should no longer enjoy the pleasures of desires.’

“Then Māra said to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, ‘If it is so that the bodhisattva, the spiritual hero, has no mental attachment, and gives away all his possessions, then, householder, please give me these goddesses.’

“Vimalakīrti replied, ‘They are given, Māra. Go home with your retinue. May you fulfill the religious aspirations of all living beings!’

“Then the goddesses, saluting Vimalakīrti, said to him, ‘Householder, how should we live in the abode of the Māras?’

“Vimalakīrti replied, ‘Sisters, there is a door of the Dharma called “The Inexhaustible Lamp.” Practice it! What is it? Sisters, a single lamp may light hundreds of thousands of lamps without itself being diminished. Likewise, sisters, a single bodhisattva may establish many hundreds of thousands of living beings in enlightenment without his mindfulness being diminished. In fact, not only does it not diminish, it grows stronger. Likewise, the more you teach and demonstrate virtuous qualities to others, the more you grow with respect to these virtuous qualities. This is the door of the Dharma called “The Inexhaustible Lamp.” When you are living in the realm of Māra, inspire innumerable gods and goddesses with the spirit of enlightenment. In such a way, you will repay the kindness of the Tathāgata, and you will become the benefactors of all living beings.’

“Then, those goddesses bowed at the feet of the Licchavi Vimalakīrti and departed in the company of Māra. Thus, Lord, I saw the supremacy of the magical power, wisdom, and eloquence of the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, and therefore I am reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness.”

The Buddha then said to the merchant’s son, Sudatta, “Noble son, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

Sudatta replied, “Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness. Why? Lord, I remember one day in my father’s house when, in order to celebrate a great sacrifice, I was bestowing gifts upon religious devotees, brahmāns, the poor, the wretched, the unfortunate, beggars, and all the needy. On the seventh and final day of this great sacrifice, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti came there and said, ‘Merchant’s son, you should not celebrate a sacrifice in this way. You should celebrate a Dharma-sacrifice. What is the use of the sacrifice of material things?’

“I then asked him, ‘How does one give a Dharma-sacrifice?’

“He replied, ‘A Dharma-sacrifice is that which develops living beings without beginning or end, giving gifts to them all simultaneously. What is that? It consists of the great love which is consummated in enlightenment; of the great compassion consummated in the concentration of the holy Dharma on the liberation of all living beings; of the great joy consummated in the aware-

ness of the supreme happiness of all living beings; and of the great equanimity consummated in concentration through knowledge.

“The Dharma-sacrifice consists of the transcendence of generosity, consummated in peacefulness and self-discipline; of the transcendence of morality, consummated in the moral development of immoral beings; of the transcendence of tolerance, consummated through the principle of selflessness; of the transcendence of effort, consummated in initiative toward enlightenment; of the transcendence of meditation, consummated in the solitude of body and mind; and of the transcendence of wisdom, consummated in the omniscient gnosis.

“The Dharma-sacrifice consists of the meditation of voidness, consummated in effectiveness in the development of all living beings; of the meditation of signlessness, consummated in the purification of all compounded things; and of the meditation of wishlessness, consummated in voluntarily assuming rebirths.

“The Dharma-sacrifice consists of heroic strength, consummated in the upholding of the holy Dharma; of the power of life, consummated in the means of unification; of the absence of pride, consummated in becoming the slave and the disciple of all living beings; of the gain of body, health, and wealth, consummated by the extraction of essence from the essenceless; of mindfulness, consummated by the six remembrances; of positive thought, consummated through the truly enjoyable Dharma; of purity of livelihood, consummated by correct spiritual practice; of the respect of noble ones, consummated by joyful and faithful service; of soberness of mind, consummated by absence of dislike for ordinary people; of high resolve, consummated by renunciation; of skill in erudition, consummated by religious practice; of retirement in solitary retreats, consummated by understanding things free of afflictions; of introspective meditation, consummated by attainment of the buddha-gnosis; of the stage of the practice of yoga, consummated by the yoga of liberating all living beings from their afflictions.

“The Dharma-sacrifice consists of the store of merit consummated by the auspicious signs and marks, the ornaments of the buddhafields, and all other means of development of living beings; of the store of knowledge consummated in the ability to teach the Dharma according to the thoughts and actions of all living beings; of the store of wisdom, consummated in the uniform gnosis free of acceptance and rejection in regard to all things;

of the store of all roots of virtue, consummated in the abandonment of all afflictions, obscurations, and unvirtuous things; and of the attainment of all the aids to enlightenment, consummated in the realization of the gnosis of omniscience as well as in accomplishment of all virtue.

“That, noble son, is the Dharma-sacrifice. The bodhisattva who lives by this Dharma-sacrifice is the best of sacrificers, and, through his extreme sacrifice, is himself worthy of offerings from all people, including the gods.’

“Lord, as soon as the householder had discoursed thus, two hundred brahmins among the crowd of brahmins present conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. And I, full of astonishment, having saluted this good man by touching his feet with my head, took from around my neck a necklace of pearls worth one hundred thousand pieces of gold and offered it to him. But he would not accept it. I then said to him, ‘Please accept, good man, this necklace of pearls, out of compassion for me, and give it to whomsoever you wish.’

“Then, Vimalakīrti took the pearls and divided them into two halves. He gave one half of them to the lowliest poor of the city, who had been disdained by those present at the sacrifice. The other half he offered to the Tathāgata Duṣprasaha. And he performed a miracle such that all present beheld the universe called Marīci and the Tathāgata Duṣprasaha. On the head of the Tathāgata Duṣprasaha, the pearl necklace took the form of a pavilion, decorated with strings of pearls, resting on four bases, with four columns, symmetrical, well constructed, and lovely to behold. Having shown such a miracle, Vimalakīrti said, ‘The giver who makes gifts to the lowliest poor of the city, considering them as worthy of offering as the Tathāgata himself, the giver who gives without any discrimination, impartially, with no expectation of reward, and with great love—that giver, I say, totally fulfills the Dharma-sacrifice.’

“Then the poor of the city, having seen that miracle and having heard that teaching, conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. Therefore, Lord, I am reluctant to go to that good man to inquire about his illness.”

In the same way, all the bodhisattvas, the great spiritual heroes, told the stories of their conversations with Vimalakīrti and declared their reluctance to go to him.

## The Consolation of the Invalid

Then, the Buddha said to the crown prince, Mañjuśrī, “Mañjuśrī, go to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti to inquire about his illness.”

Mañjuśrī replied, “Lord, it is difficult to attend upon the Licchavi Vimalakīrti. He is gifted with marvelous eloquence concerning the law of the profound. He is extremely skilled in full expressions and in the reconciliation of dichotomies. His eloquence is inexorable, and no one can resist his imperturbable intellect. He accomplishes all the activities of the bodhisattvas. He penetrates all the secret mysteries of the bodhisattvas and the buddhas. He is skilled in civilizing all the abodes of devils. He plays with the great superknowledges. He is consummate in wisdom and liberative art. He has attained the supreme excellence of the indivisible, nondual sphere of the ultimate realm. He is skilled in teaching the Dharma with its infinite modalities within the uniform ultimate. He is skilled in granting means of attainment in accordance with the spiritual faculties of all living beings. He has thoroughly integrated his realization with skill in liberative art. He has attained decisiveness with regard to all questions. Thus, although he cannot be withstood by someone of my feeble defenses, still, sustained by the grace of the Buddha, I will go to him and will converse with him as well as I can.”

Thereupon, in that assembly, the bodhisattvas, the great disciples, the Śākras, the Brahmās, the Lokapālas, and the gods and goddesses, all had this thought: “Surely the conversations of the crown prince Mañjuśrī and that good man will result in a profound teaching of the Dharma.”

Thus, eight thousand bodhisattvas, five hundred disciples, a great number of Śākras, Brahmās, Lokapālas, and many hundreds of thousands of gods and goddesses, all followed the crown prince Mañjuśrī to listen to the Dharma. And the crown prince Mañjuśrī, surrounded and followed by these bodhisattvas, disciples, Śākras, Brahmās, Lokapālas, gods, and goddesses, entered the great city of Vaiśālī.

Meanwhile, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti thought to himself, “Mañjuśrī, the crown prince, is coming here with numerous attendants. Now, may this house be transformed into emptiness!”

Then, magically his house became empty. Even the doorkeeper disappeared. And, except for the invalid's couch upon which Vimalakīrti himself was lying, no bed or couch or seat could be seen anywhere.

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti saw the crown prince Mañjuśrī and addressed him thus: “Mañjuśrī! Welcome, Mañjuśrī! You are very welcome! Here you are, without previously having come, been seen or been heard.

Mañjuśrī declared, “Householder, it is as you say. Who comes, ultimately comes not. Who goes, ultimately goes not. Why? Coming is not really known in coming, and going is not really known in going. What is seen is not to be seen again, ultimately.

“Good sir, is your condition tolerable? Is it livable? Are your physical elements not disturbed? Is your sickness diminishing? Is it not increasing? The Buddha asks about you—if you have slight trouble, slight discomfort, slight sickness, if your distress is light, if you are cared for, strong, at ease, without self-reproach, and if you are living in touch with the supreme happiness.

“Householder, whence came this sickness of yours? How long will it continue? How does it stand? How can it be alleviated?” Vimalakīrti replied, “Mañjuśrī, my sickness comes from ignorance and the thirst for existence and it will last as long as do the sicknesses of all living beings. Were all living beings to be free from sickness, I also would not be sick. Why? Mañjuśrī, for the bodhisattva, the world consists only of living beings, and sickness is inherent in living in the world. Were all living beings free of sickness, the bodhisattva also would be free of sickness. For example, Mañjuśrī, when the only son of a merchant is sick, both his parents become sick on account of the sickness of their son. And the parents will suffer as long as that only son does not recover from his sickness. Just so, Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva loves all living beings as if each were his only child. He becomes sick when they are sick and is cured when they are cured. You ask me, Mañjuśrī, whence comes my sickness; the sicknesses of the bodhisattvas arise from great compassion.”

*Mañjuśrī:* Householder, why is your house empty? Why have you no servants?

*Vimalakīrti:* Mañjuśrī, all buddhafiels are also empty.

*Mañjuśrī:* What makes them empty?

*Vimalakīrti:* They are empty because of emptiness.

*Mañjuśrī:* What is “empty” about emptiness?

*Vimalakīrti*: Constructions are empty, because of emptiness.

*Mañjuśrī*: Can emptiness be conceptually constructed?

*Vimalakīrti*: Even that concept is itself empty, and emptiness cannot construct emptiness.

*Mañjuśrī*: Householder, where should emptiness be sought?

*Vimalakīrti*: Mañjuśrī, emptiness should be sought among the sixty-two convictions.

*Mañjuśrī*: Where should the sixty-two convictions be sought?

*Vimalakīrti*: They should be sought in the liberation of the tathāgatas.

*Mañjuśrī*: Where should the liberation of the tathāgatas be sought?

*Vimalakīrti*: It should be sought in the prime mental activity of all living beings. Mañjuśrī, you ask me why I am without servants, but all Māras and opponents are my servants. Why? The Māras advocate this life of birth and death and the bodhisattva does not avoid life. The outsider opponents advocate convictions, and the bodhisattva is not troubled by convictions. Therefore, all Māras and opponents are my servants.

*Mañjuśrī*: Householder, of what sort is your sickness?

*Vimalakīrti*: It is immaterial and invisible.

*Mañjuśrī*: Is it physical or mental?

*Vimalakīrti*: It is not physical, since the body is insubstantial in itself. It is not mental, since the nature of the mind is like illusion.

*Mañjuśrī*: Householder, which of the four main elements is disturbed: earth, water, fire, or air?

*Vimalakīrti*: Mañjuśrī, I am sick only because the elements of living beings are disturbed by sicknesses.

*Mañjuśrī*: Householder, how should a bodhisattva console another bodhisattva who is sick?

*Vimalakīrti*: He should tell him that the body is impermanent, but should not exhort him to renunciation or disgust. He should tell him that the body is miserable, but should not encourage him to find solace in liberation; that the body is selfless, but that living beings should be developed; that the body is peaceful, but not to seek any ultimate calm. He should tell him to confess his evil deeds, but not just to escape them. He should encourage his empathy for all living beings on account of his own sickness, his remembrance of suffering experienced from beginningless time, and his consciousness of working for the welfare of living beings. He should encourage him to manifest the roots of virtue, to maintain the primal purity and the lack of

craving, and thus to always strive to become the king of healers, who can cure all sicknesses. Thus should a bodhisattva console a sick bodhisattva, in such a way as to make him happy.

Mañjuśrī asked, “Noble sir, how should a sick bodhisattva control his own mind?”

Vimalakīrti replied, “Mañjuśrī, a sick bodhisattva should control his own mind with the following consideration: sickness arises from total involvement in the process of misunderstanding from beginningless time. It arises from the afflictions that result from unreal mental constructions, and hence ultimately nothing is perceived which can be said to be sick. Why? The body is the issue of the four main elements, and in these elements there is no owner and no agent. There is no self in this body, and, except for arbitrary insistence on self, ultimately no “I” which can be said to be sick can be apprehended. Therefore, thinking ‘ “I” should not adhere to any self, and “I” should rest in the knowledge of the root of illness,’ he should abandon the conception of himself as a personality and produce the conception of himself as a thing, thinking, ‘This body is an aggregate of many things; when it is born, only things are born; when it ceases, only things cease; these things have no awareness or feeling of each other; when they are born, they do not think, “I am born.” When they cease, they do not think, “I cease.” ’

“Furthermore, he should understand thoroughly the conception of himself as a thing by cultivating the following consideration: ‘Just as in the case of the conception of “self,” so the conception of “thing” is also a misunderstanding, and this misunderstanding is also a grave sickness; I should free myself from this sickness and should strive to abandon it.’

“What is the elimination of this sickness? It is the elimination of egoism and possessiveness. What is the elimination of egoism and possessiveness? It is the freedom from dualism. What is freedom from dualism? It is the absence of involvement with either the external or the internal. What is absence of involvement with either external or internal? It is non-deviation, non-fluctuation, and non-distraction from sameness. What is sameness? It is the sameness of everything from self to liberation. Why? Because both self and liberation are void. How can both be void? As verbal designations, they both are void, and neither is established in reality. Therefore, one who sees such sameness makes no difference between sickness and voidness; his sickness is itself voidness, and that sickness as voidness is itself void.

“The sick bodhisattva should recognize that sensation is ultimately nonsensation, but he should not realize the cessation of sensation. Although both pleasure and pain are abandoned when the buddha-qualities are fully accomplished, there is then no sacrifice of the great compassion for all living beings living in the bad migrations. Thus, recognizing in his own suffering the infinite sufferings of these living beings, the bodhisattva correctly contemplates these living beings and resolves to cure all sicknesses.

“As for these living beings, there is nothing to be applied, and there is nothing to be removed; one has only to teach them the Dharma for them to realize the basis from which sicknesses arise. What is this basis? It is object-perception. To the extent that a basis of object-perception is objectified, it is the basis of sickness. What is it that is objectified? The three realms of existence are objectified. What is the thorough understanding of the basis of that object-perception? It is its nonperception, as one does not objectify a thing that is not perceived. What does one not perceive? One does not perceive the two views, the view of the self and the view of the other. Therefore, it is called nonperception.

“Mañjuśrī, thus should a sick bodhisattva control his own mind in order to overcome old age, sickness, death, and birth. Such, Mañjuśrī, is the sickness of the bodhisattva. If he takes it otherwise, all his efforts will be in vain. Just as one is called ‘hero’ when one overcomes all enemies, so, too, one is called ‘bodhisattva’ when one conquers the miseries of aging, sickness, and death.

“The sick bodhisattva should tell himself: ‘Just as my sickness is unreal and nonexistent, so the sicknesses of all living beings are unreal and nonexistent.’ Through such considerations, he arouses the great compassion toward all living beings without falling into any sentimental compassion, but instead, arouses great compassion toward all living beings through striving to eliminate the incidental afflictions. Why? Because great compassion that falls into sentimentally purposive views only exhausts the bodhisattva in his reincarnations. But the great compassion which is free of involvement with sentimentally purposive views does not exhaust the bodhisattva in all his reincarnations. He does not reincarnate through involvement with such views but reincarnates with his mind free of involvement. Hence, even his reincarnation is like a liberation. Being reincarnated as if being liberated, he has the power and ability to teach the Dharma which liberates living beings from their bondage. As the Lord declares: ‘It is not possible for one who is himself bound to deliver others from their bondage. But one who is

himself liberated is able to liberate others from their bondage.’ Therefore, the bodhisattva should participate in liberation and should not participate in bondage.

“What is bondage? And what is liberation? To indulge in liberation from the world without employing liberative art is bondage for the bodhisattva. To engage in life in the world with full employment of liberative art is liberation for the bodhisattva. To experience the taste of contemplation, meditation, and concentration without skill in liberative art is bondage. To experience the taste of contemplation and meditation with skill in liberative art is liberation. Wisdom not integrated with liberative art is bondage, but wisdom integrated with liberative art is liberation. Liberative art not integrated with wisdom is bondage, but liberative art integrated with wisdom is liberation.

“How is wisdom not integrated with liberative art a bondage? Wisdom not integrated with liberative art consists of concentration on voidness, signlessness, and wishlessness, and yet it fails to concentrate on cultivation of the auspicious signs and marks, on the adornment of the buddhafield, and on the work of development of living beings—and it is bondage.

“How is wisdom integrated with liberative art a liberation? Wisdom integrated with liberative art consists of concentration on cultivation of the auspicious signs and marks, on the adornment of the buddha field, and on the work of development of living beings, all the while concentrating on deep investigation of voidness, signlessness, and wishlessness—and it is liberation.

“What is the bondage of liberative art not integrated with wisdom? The bondage of liberative art not integrated with wisdom consists of the bodhisattva’s planting of the roots of virtue without dedicating them for the sake of enlightenment, while living in the grip of dogmatic convictions, passions, attachments, resentments, and their subconscious instincts.

“What is the liberation of liberative art integrated with wisdom? The liberation of liberative art integrated with wisdom consists of the bodhisattva’s dedication of his roots of virtue for the sake of enlightenment, without taking any pride therein, while forgoing all convictions, passions, attachments, resentments, and their subconscious instincts.

“Mañjuśrī, thus should the sick bodhisattva consider things. His wisdom is the consideration of body, mind, and sickness as impermanent, miserable, empty, and selfless. His liberative art consists of not exhausting himself by trying to avoid all physical sickness, and of applying himself to accomplish the benefit of living beings, without interrupting the cycle of reincarnations.

Furthermore, his wisdom lies in understanding that body, mind, and sickness are neither new nor old, whether considered simultaneously or sequentially. And his liberative art lies in not seeking pacification or cessation of body, mind, or sicknesses.

“That, Mañjuśrī, is the way a sick bodhisattva should concentrate his mind; he should live neither in control of his mind, nor in indulgence of his mind. Why? To live by indulging the mind is proper for fools and to live in control of the mind is proper for the disciples. Therefore, the bodhisattva should live neither in control nor in indulgence of his mind. Not living in either of the two extremes is the domain of the bodhisattva.

“Not the domain of the ordinary individual and not the domain of the arhat, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the world yet not the domain of the afflictions, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. Where one understands liberation, yet does not enter final and complete liberation, there is the domain of the bodhisattva. Where the four Māras manifest, yet where all the works of Māras are transcended, there is the domain of the bodhisattva. Where one seeks the gnosis of omniscience, yet does not attain this gnosis at the wrong time, there is the domain of the bodhisattva. Where one knows the four noble truths, yet does not realize those truths at the wrong time, there is the domain of the bodhisattva. A domain of introspective insight, wherein one does not arrest voluntary reincarnation in the world, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. A domain where one realizes birthlessness, yet does not become destined for the ultimate, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. Where one sees relativity without entertaining any convictions, there is the domain of the bodhisattva. Where one associates with all beings, yet keeps free of all afflictive instincts, there is the domain of the bodhisattva. A domain of solitude with no place for the exhaustion of body and mind, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the triple world, yet indivisible from the ultimate realm, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of voidness, yet where one cultivates all types of virtues, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of signlessness, where one keeps in sight the deliverance of all living beings, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of wishlessness, where one voluntarily manifests lives in the world, such is the domain of the bodhisattva.

“A domain essentially without undertaking, yet where all the roots of virtue are undertaken without interruption, such is the domain of the

bodhisattva. The domain of the six transcendences, where one attains the transcendence of the thoughts and actions of all living beings, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the six superknowledges, wherein defilements are not exhausted, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of living by the holy Dharma, without even perceiving any evil paths, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the four immeasurables, where one does not accept rebirth in the heaven of Brahmā, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the six remembrances, unaffected by any sort of defilement, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of contemplation, concentration, and absorption, where one does not reincarnate in the formless realms by force of these concentrations and absorptions, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the four foci of mindfulness, where body, sensation, mind, and things are not ultimately of concern, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the four right efforts, where the duality of good and evil is not apprehended, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the four bases of magical powers, where they are effortlessly mastered, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the five spiritual faculties, where one knows the degrees of the spiritual faculties of living beings, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of living with the five powers, where one delights in the ten powers of the tathāgata, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of perfection of the seven factors of enlightenment, where one is skilled in the knowledge of fine intellectual distinctions, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of living by the eightfold path, without even perceiving any evil paths, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the cultivation of the aptitude for mental quiescence and transcendental analysis, where one does not fall into extreme quietism, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of the realization of the unborn nature of all things, yet of the perfection of the body, the auspicious signs and marks, and the ornaments of the Buddha, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of manifesting the attitudes of the disciples and the solitary sages without sacrificing the qualities of the Buddha, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain of conformity to all things utterly pure in nature while manifesting behavior that suits the inclinations of all living beings, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. A domain where one realizes that all the buddhafi elds are indestructible and uncreatable, having the nature of infinite space, yet where one manifests the establishment of the qualities of

the buddhafiels in all their variety and magnitude, such is the domain of the bodhisattva. The domain where one turns the wheel of the holy Dharma and manifests the magnificence of ultimate liberation, yet never forsakes the career of the bodhisattva, such is the domain of the bodhisattva!”

When Vimalakīrti had spoken this discourse, eight thousand of the gods in the company of the crown prince Mañjuśrī conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.

## The Inconceivable Liberation

Thereupon, the venerable Śāriputra had this thought: “There is not even a single chair in this house. Where are these disciples and bodhisattvas going to sit?”

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti read the thought of the venerable Śāriputra and said, “Reverend Śāriputra, did you come here for the sake of the Dharma? Or did you come here for the sake of a chair?”

Śāriputra replied, “I came for the sake of the Dharma, not for the sake of a chair.”

Vimalakīrti continued, “Reverend Śāriputra, he who is interested in the Dharma is not interested even in his own body, much less in a chair. Reverend Śāriputra, he who is interested in the Dharma has no interest in matter, sensation, intellect, motivation, or consciousness. He has no interest in these aggregates, or in the elements, or in the sense-media. Interested in the Dharma, he has no interest in the realm of desire, the realm of pure matter, or the immaterial realm. Interested in the Dharma, he is not interested in attachment to the Buddha, attachment to the Dharma, or attachment to the Saṅgha. Reverend Śāriputra, he who is interested in the Dharma is not interested in recognizing suffering, abandoning its origination, realizing its cessation, or practicing the path. Why? The Dharma is ultimately without formulation and without verbalization. Who verbalizes: ‘Suffering should be recognized, origination should be eliminated, cessation should be realized, the path should be practiced,’ is not interested in the Dharma but is interested in verbalization.

“Reverend Śāriputra, the Dharma is calm and peaceful. Those who are engaged in production and destruction are not interested in the Dharma, are not interested in solitude, but are interested in production and destruction.

“Furthermore, reverend Śāriputra, the Dharma is without taint and free of defilement. He who is attached to anything, even to liberation, is not interested in the Dharma but is interested in the taint of desire. The Dharma is not an object. He who pursues objects is not interested in the Dharma but is interested in objects. The Dharma is without acceptance or rejection. He who holds on to things or lets go of things is not interested in

the Dharma but is interested in holding and letting go. The Dharma is not a secure refuge. He who enjoys a secure refuge is not interested in the Dharma but is interested in a secure refuge. The Dharma is without sign. He whose consciousness pursues signs is not interested in the Dharma but is interested in signs. The Dharma is not a society. He who seeks to associate with the Dharma is not interested in the Dharma but is interested in association. The Dharma is not a sight, a sound, a category, or an idea. He who is involved in sights, sounds, categories, and ideas is not interested in the Dharma but is interested in sights, sounds, categories, and ideas. Reverend Śāriputra, the Dharma is free of compounded things and uncompounded things. He who adheres to compounded things and uncompounded things is not interested in the Dharma but is interested in adhering to compounded things and uncompounded things.

“Thereupon, reverend Śāriputra, if you are interested in the Dharma, you should take no interest in anything.”

When Vimalakīrti had spoken this discourse, five hundred gods obtained the purity of the Dharma-eye in viewing all things.

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to the crown prince, Mañjuśrī, “Mañjuśrī, you have already been in innumerable hundreds of thousands of buddhafields throughout the universes of the ten directions. In which buddhafield did you see the best lion-thrones with the finest qualities?”

Mañjuśrī replied, “Noble sir, if one crosses the buddhafields to the east, which are more numerous than all the grains of sand of thirty-two Ganges rivers, one will discover a universe called Merudhvaja. There dwells a tathāgata called Merupradīparāja. His body measures eighty-four hundred thousand leagues in height, and the height of his throne is sixty-eight hundred thousand leagues. The bodhisattvas there are forty-two hundred thousand leagues tall and their own thrones are thirty-four hundred thousand leagues high. Noble sir, the finest and most superb thrones exist in that universe Merudhvaja, which is the buddhafield of the Tathāgata Merupradīparāja.”

At that moment, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, having focused himself in concentration, performed a miraculous feat such that the Lord Tathāgata Merupradīparāja, in the universe Merudhvaja, sent to this universe thirty-two hundred thousand thrones. These thrones were so tall, spacious, and beautiful that the bodhisattvas, great disciples, Śakras, Brahmās, Lokapālas, and other gods had never before seen the like. The thrones descended from the sky and came to rest in the house of the Licchavi Vimalakīrti. The thirty-

two hundred thousand thrones arranged themselves without crowding and the house seemed to enlarge itself accordingly. The great city of Vaiśālī did not become obscured; neither did the land of Jambudvīpa, nor the world of four continents. Everything else appeared just as it was before.

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to the crown prince Mañjuśrī, “Mañjuśrī, let the bodhisattvas be seated on these thrones, having transformed their bodies to a suitable size!”

Then, those bodhisattvas who had attained the superknowledges transformed their bodies to a height of forty-two hundred thousand leagues and sat upon the thrones. But the beginner bodhisattvas were not able to transform themselves to sit upon the thrones. Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti taught these beginner bodhisattvas a teaching that enabled them to attain the five superknowledges, and, having attained them, they transformed their bodies to a height of forty-two hundred thousand leagues and sat upon the thrones. But still the great disciples were not able to seat themselves upon the thrones.

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to the venerable Śāriputra, “Reverend Śāriputra, take your seat upon a throne.”

He replied, “Good sir, the thrones are too big and too high, and I cannot sit upon them.”

Vimalakīrti said, “Reverend Śāriputra, bow down to the Tathāgata Merupradīparāja, and you will be able to take your seat.”

Then, the great disciples bowed down to the Tathāgata Merupradīparāja and they were seated upon the thrones.

Then, the venerable Śāriputra said to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, “Noble sir, it is astonishing that these thousands of thrones, so big and so high, should fit into such a small house and that the great city of Vaiśālī, the villages, cities, kingdoms, capitals of Jambudvīpa, the other three continents, the abodes of the gods, the nāgas, the yakṣas, the gandharvas, the asuras, the garuḍas, the kiṃnaras, and the mahoraḡas—that all of these should appear without any obstacle, just as they were before!”

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti replied, “Reverend Śāriputra, for the tathāgatas and the bodhisattvas, there is a liberation called ‘inconceivable.’ The bodhisattva who lives in the inconceivable liberation can put the king of mountains, Sumeru, which is so high, so great, so noble, and so vast, into a mustard seed. He can perform this feat without enlarging the mustard seed and without shrinking Mount Sumeru. And the deities of the assembly of

the four Mahārājas and of the Trayastriṃśa heavens do not even know where they are. Only those beings who are destined to be disciplined by miracles see and understand the putting of the king of mountains, Sumeru, into the mustard seed. That, reverend Śāriputra, is an entrance to the domain of the inconceivable liberation of the bodhisattvas.

“Furthermore, reverend Śāriputra, the bodhisattva who lives in the inconceivable liberation can pour into a single pore of his skin all the waters of the four great oceans, without injuring the water-animals such as fish, tortoises, crocodiles, frogs, and other creatures, and without the nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, and asuras even being aware of where they are. And the whole operation is visible without any injury or disturbance to any of those living beings.

“Such a bodhisattva can pick up with his right hand this billion-world-galactic universe as if it were a potter’s wheel and, spinning it round, throw it beyond universes as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, without the living beings therein knowing their motion or its origin, and he can catch it and put it back in its place, without the living beings suspecting their coming and going; and yet the whole operation is visible.

“Furthermore, reverend Śāriputra, there are beings who become disciplined after an immense period of evolution, and there are also those who are disciplined after a short period of evolution. The bodhisattva who lives in the inconceivable liberation, for the sake of disciplining those living beings who are disciplined through immeasurable periods of evolution, can make the passing of a week seem like the passing of an eon, and he can make the passing of an eon seem like the passing of a week for those who are disciplined through a short period of evolution. The living beings who are disciplined through an immeasurable period of evolution actually perceive a week to be the passing of an eon, and those disciplined by a short period of evolution actually perceive an eon to be the passing of a week.

“Thus, a bodhisattva who lives in the inconceivable liberation can manifest all the splendors of the virtues of all the buddhafiels within a single buddhafielf. Likewise, he can place all living beings in the palm of his right hand and can show them with the supernatural speed of thought all the buddhafiels without ever leaving his own buddhafielf. He can display in a single pore all the offerings ever offered to all the Buddhas of the ten directions, and the orbs of all the suns, moons, and stars of the ten directions. He can inhale all the hurricanes of the cosmic wind-atmospheres of the

ten directions into his mouth without harming his own body and without letting the forests and the grasses of the buddhafi elds be flattened. He can take all the masses of fire of all the supernovas that ultimately consume all the universes of all the buddhafi elds into his stomach without interfering with their functions. Having crossed buddhafi elds as numerous as the sands of the Ganges downward, and having taken up a buddhafi eld, he can rise up through buddhafi elds as numerous as the sands of the Ganges and place it on high, just as a strong man may pick up a jujube leaf on the point of a needle.

“Thus, a bodhisattva who lives in the inconceivable liberation can magically transform any kind of living being into a universal monarch, a Lokapāla, a Śakra, a Brahmā, a disciple, a solitary sage, a bodhisattva, and even into a buddha. The bodhisattva can transform miraculously all the cries and noises, superior, mediocre, and inferior, of all living beings of the ten directions, into the voice of the Buddha, with the words of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṅgha, having them proclaim, ‘Impermanent! Miserable! Empty! Selfless!’ And he can cause them to recite the words and sounds of all the teachings taught by all the buddhas of the ten directions.

“Reverend Śāriputra, I have shown you only a small part of the entrance into the domain of the bodhisattva who lives in the inconceivable liberation. Reverend Śāriputra, to explain to you the teaching of the full entrance into the domain of the bodhisattva who lives in the inconceivable liberation would require more than an eon, and even more than that.”

Then, the patriarch Mahākāśyapa, having heard this teaching of the inconceivable liberation of the bodhisattvas, was amazed, and he said to the venerable Śāriputra, “Venerable Śāriputra, if one were to show a variety of things to a person blind from birth, he would not be able to see a single thing. Likewise, venerable Śāriputra, when this door of the inconceivable liberation is taught, all the disciples and solitary sages are sightless, like the man blind from birth, and cannot comprehend even a single cause of the inconceivable liberation. Who is there among the wise who, hearing about this inconceivable liberation, does not conceive the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment? As for us, whose faculties are deteriorated, like a burned and rotten seed, what else can we do if we do not become receptive to this great vehicle? We, all the disciples and solitary sages, upon hearing this teaching of the Dharma, should utter a cry of regret that would shake this billion-world-galactic universe! And as for the bodhisattvas, when they hear this inconceivable liberation they should be as joyful as a young crown prince

when he takes the diadem and is anointed, and they should increase to the utmost their devotion to this inconceivable liberation. Indeed, what could the entire host of Māras ever do to one who is devoted to this inconceivable liberation?”

When the patriarch Mahākāśyapa had uttered this discourse, thirty-two thousand gods conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to the patriarch Mahākāśyapa, “Reverend Mahākāśyapa, the Māras who play the devil in the innumerable universes of the ten directions are all bodhisattvas dwelling in the inconceivable liberation, who are playing the devil in order to develop living beings through their skill in liberative art. Reverend Mahākāśyapa, all the miserable beggars who come to the bodhisattvas of the innumerable universes of the ten directions to ask for a hand, a foot, an ear, a nose, some blood, muscles, bones, marrow, an eye, a torso, a head, a limb, a member, a throne, a kingdom, a country, a wife, a son, a daughter, a slave, a slave-girl, a horse, an elephant, a chariot, a cart, gold, silver, jewels, pearls, conches, crystal, coral, beryl, treasures, food, drink, elixirs, and clothes—these demanding beggars are usually bodhisattvas living in the inconceivable liberation who, through their skill in liberative art, wish to test and thus demonstrate the firmness of the high resolve of the bodhisattvas. Why? Reverend Mahākāśyapa, the bodhisattvas demonstrate that firmness by means of terrible austerities. Ordinary persons have no power to be thus demanding of bodhisattvas, unless they are granted the opportunity. They are not capable of killing and depriving in that manner without being freely given the chance.

“Reverend Mahākāśyapa, just as a glowworm cannot eclipse the light of the sun, so, reverend Mahākāśyapa, it is not possible without special allowance that an ordinary person can thus attack and deprive a bodhisattva. Reverend Mahākāśyapa, just as a donkey could not muster an attack on a wild elephant, even so, reverend Mahākāśyapa, one who is not himself a bodhisattva cannot harass a bodhisattva. Only one who is himself a bodhisattva can harass another bodhisattva, and only a bodhisattva can tolerate the harassment of another bodhisattva. Reverend Mahākāśyapa, such is the introduction to the power of the knowledge of liberative art of the bodhisattvas who live in the inconceivable liberation.”

## The Goddess

Thereupon, Mañjuśrī, the crown prince, addressed the Licchavi Vimalakīrti: “Good sir, how should a bodhisattva regard all living beings?”

Vimalakīrti replied, “Mañjuśrī, a bodhisattva should regard all living beings as a wise man regards the reflection of the moon in water or as magicians regard men created by magic. He should regard them as being like a face in a mirror; like the water of a mirage; like the sound of an echo; like a mass of clouds in the sky; like the previous moment of a ball of foam; like the appearance and disappearance of a bubble of water; like the core of a plantain tree; like a flash of lightning; like the fifth great element; like the seventh sense-medium; like the appearance of matter in an immaterial realm; like a sprout from a rotten seed; like a tortoise-hair coat; like the fun of games for one who wishes to die; like the egoistic views of a stream-winner; like a third rebirth of a once-returner; like the descent of a nonreturner into a womb; like the existence of desire, hatred, and folly in an arhat; like thoughts of avarice, immorality, wickedness, and hostility in a bodhisattva who has attained tolerance; like the instincts of afflictions in a tathāgata; like the perception of color in one blind from birth; like the inhalation and exhalation of an ascetic absorbed in the meditation of cessation; like the track of a bird in the sky; like the erection of a eunuch; like the pregnancy of a barren woman; like the unproduced afflictions of an emanated incarnation of the Tathāgata; like dream-visions seen after waking; like the afflictions of one who is free of conceptualizations; like fire burning without fuel; like the reincarnation of one who has attained ultimate liberation.

“Precisely thus, Mañjuśrī, does a bodhisattva who realizes ultimate selflessness consider all beings.”

Mañjuśrī then asked further, “Noble sir, if a bodhisattva considers all living beings in such a way, how does he generate the great love toward them?”

Vimalakīrti replied, “Mañjuśrī, when a bodhisattva considers all living beings in this way, he thinks: ‘Just as I have realized the Dharma, so should I teach it to living beings.’ Thereby, he generates the love that is truly a refuge for all living beings; the love that is peaceful because free of grasping; the

love that is not feverish, because free of passions; the love that accords with reality because it is the very same in all three times; the love that is without conflict because free of the violence of the passions; the love that is nondual because it is involved neither with the external nor with the internal; the love that is imperturbable because totally ultimate.

“Thereby he generates the love that is firm, its high resolve unbreakable, like a diamond; the love that is pure, purified in its intrinsic nature; the love that is even, its aspirations being equal; the arhat’s love that has eliminated its enemy; the bodhisattva’s love that continuously develops living beings; the Tathāgata’s love that understands reality; the Buddha’s love that causes living beings to awaken from their sleep; the love that is spontaneous because it is fully enlightened spontaneously; the love that is enlightenment because it is unity of experience; the love that has no presumption because it has eliminated attachment and aversion; the love that is great compassion because it infuses the Mahāyāna with radiance; the love that is never exhausted because it acknowledges voidness and selflessness; the love that is giving because it bestows the gift of Dharma free of the tight fist of a bad teacher; the love that is morality because it improves immoral living beings; the love that is tolerance because it protects both self and others; the love that is effort because it takes responsibility for all living beings; the love that is contemplation because it refrains from indulgence in tastes; the love that is wisdom because it causes attainment at the proper time; the love that is liberative art because it shows the way everywhere; the love that is without formality because it is pure in motivation; the love that is without deviation because it acts from decisive motivation; the love that is high resolve because it is without passions; the love that is without deceit because it is not artificial; the love that is happiness because it introduces living beings to the happiness of the Buddha. Such, Mañjuśrī, is the great love of a bodhisattva.”

*Mañjuśrī:* What is the great compassion of a bodhisattva?

*Vimalakīrti:* It is the giving of all accumulated roots of virtue to all living beings.

*Mañjuśrī:* What is the great joy of the bodhisattva?

*Vimalakīrti:* It is to be joyful and without regret in giving.

*Mañjuśrī:* What is the equanimity of the bodhisattva?

*Vimalakīrti:* It is what benefits both self and others.

*Mañjuśrī:* To what should one resort when terrified by fear of life?

*Vimalakīrti:* Mañjuśrī, a bodhisattva who is terrified by fear of life should resort to the magnanimity of the Buddha.

*Mañjuśrī:* Where should he who wishes to resort to the magnanimity of the Buddha take his stand?

*Vimalakīrti:* He should stand in equanimity toward all living beings.

*Mañjuśrī:* Where should he who wishes to stand in equanimity toward all living beings take his stand?

*Vimalakīrti:* He should live for the liberation of all living beings.

*Mañjuśrī:* What should he who wishes to liberate all living beings do?

*Vimalakīrti:* He should liberate them from their afflictions.

*Mañjuśrī:* How should he who wishes to eliminate afflictions apply himself?

*Vimalakīrti:* He should apply himself appropriately.

*Mañjuśrī:* How should he apply himself, to “apply himself appropriately”?

*Vimalakīrti:* He should apply himself to productionlessness and to destructionlessness.

*Mañjuśrī:* What is not produced? And what is not destroyed?

*Vimalakīrti:* Evil is not produced and good is not destroyed.

*Mañjuśrī:* What is the root of good and evil?

*Vimalakīrti:* Materiality is the root of good and evil.

*Mañjuśrī:* What is the root of materiality?

*Vimalakīrti:* Desire is the root of materiality.

*Mañjuśrī:* What is the root of desire and attachment?

*Vimalakīrti:* Unreal construction is the root of desire.

*Mañjuśrī:* What is the root of unreal construction?

*Vimalakīrti:* The false concept is its root.

*Mañjuśrī:* What is the root of the false concept?

*Vimalakīrti:* Baselessness.

*Mañjuśrī:* What is the root of baselessness?

*Vimalakīrti:* Mañjuśrī, when something is baseless, how can it have any root? Therefore, all things stand on the root which is baseless.

Thereupon, a certain goddess who lived in that house, having heard this teaching of the Dharma of the great heroic bodhisattvas, and being delighted, pleased, and overjoyed, manifested herself in a material body and showered the great spiritual heroes, the bodhisattvas, and the great

disciples with heavenly flowers. When the flowers fell on the bodies of the bodhisattvas, they fell off on the floor, but when they fell on the bodies of the great disciples, they stuck to them and did not fall. The great disciples shook the flowers and even tried to use their magical powers, but still the flowers would not shake off.

Then, the goddess said to the venerable Śāriputra, “Reverend Śāriputra, why do you shake these flowers?”

Śāriputra replied, “Goddess, these flowers are not proper for religious persons and so we are trying to shake them off.”

The goddess said, “Do not say that, reverend Śāriputra. Why? These flowers are proper indeed! Why? Such flowers have neither constructual thought nor discrimination. But the elder Śāriputra has both constructual thought and discrimination.

“Reverend Śāriputra, impropriety for one who has renounced the world for the discipline of the rightly taught Dharma consists of constructual thought and discrimination, yet the elders are full of such thoughts. One who is without such thoughts is always proper.

“Reverend Śāriputra, see how these flowers do not stick to the bodies of these great spiritual heroes, the bodhisattvas! This is because they have eliminated constructual thoughts and discriminations.

“In the same way that evil spirits have power over fearful men but cannot disturb the fearless, those intimidated by fear of the world are in the power of forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures, which do not disturb those who are free from fear of the passions inherent in the constructive world. Thus, these flowers stick to the bodies of those who have not eliminated their instincts for the passions and do not stick to the bodies of those who have eliminated their instincts. Therefore, the flowers do not stick to the bodies of these bodhisattvas, who have abandoned all instincts.”

Then the venerable Śāriputra said to the goddess, “Goddess, how long have you been in this house?”

The goddess replied, “I have been here as long as the elder has been in liberation.”

Śāriputra said, “Then, have you been in this house for quite some time?”

The goddess said, “Has the elder been in liberation for quite some time?”

At that, the elder Śāriputra fell silent.

The goddess continued, “Elder, you are ‘foremost of the wise!’ Why do you not speak? Now, when it is your turn, you do not answer the question.”

*Śāriputra:* Since liberation is inexpressible, goddess, I do not know what to say.

*Goddess:* All the syllables pronounced by the elder have the nature of liberation. Why? Liberation is neither internal nor external, nor can it be apprehended apart from them. Likewise, syllables are neither internal nor external, nor can they be apprehended anywhere else. Therefore, reverend Śāriputra, do not point to liberation by abandoning speech! Why? The holy liberation is the equality of all things!

*Śāriputra:* Goddess, is not liberation the freedom from desire, hatred, and folly?

*Goddess:* “Liberation is freedom from desire, hatred, and folly”—that is the teaching for the excessively proud. But those free of pride are taught that the very nature of desire, hatred, and folly is itself liberation.

*Śāriputra:* Excellent! Excellent, goddess! Pray, what have you attained, what have you realized, that you have such eloquence?

*Goddess:* I have attained nothing, reverend Śāriputra. I have no realization. Therefore I have such eloquence. Whoever thinks, “I have attained! I have realized!” is overly proud in the discipline of the well taught Dharma.

*Śāriputra:* Goddess, do you belong to the disciple vehicle, to the solitary sage vehicle, or to the great vehicle?

*Goddess:* I belong to the disciple vehicle when I teach it to those who need it. I belong to the solitary sage vehicle when I teach the twelve links of dependent origination to those who need them. And, since I never abandon the great compassion, I belong to the great vehicle, as all need that teaching to attain ultimate liberation.

Nevertheless, reverend Śāriputra, just as one cannot smell the castor plant in a magnolia wood, but only the magnolia flowers, so, reverend Śāriputra, living in this house, which is redolent with the perfume of the virtues of the buddha qualities, one does not smell the perfume of the disciples and the solitary sages. Reverend Śāriputra, the Śakras, the Brahmās, the Lokapālas, the devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, and mahoragas who live in this house hear the Dharma from the mouth of this holy man and, enticed by the perfume of the virtues of the buddha qualities, proceed to conceive the spirit of enlightenment.

Reverend Śāriputra, I have been in this house for twelve years, and I have heard no discourses concerning the disciples and solitary sages but have

heard only those concerning the great love, the great compassion, and the inconceivable qualities of the Buddha.

Reverend Śāriputra, eight strange and wonderful things manifest themselves constantly in this house. What are these eight?

A light of golden hue shines here constantly, so bright that it is hard to distinguish day and night; and neither the moon nor the sun shines here distinctly. That is the first wonder of this house.

Furthermore, reverend Śāriputra, whoever enters this house is no longer troubled by his afflictions from the moment he is within. That is the second strange and wonderful thing.

Furthermore, reverend Śāriputra, this house is never forsaken by Śakra, Brahmā, the Lokapālas, and the bodhisattvas from all the other buddhafi elds. That is the third strange and wonderful thing.

Furthermore, reverend Śāriputra, this house is never empty of the sounds of the Dharma, the discourse on the six transcendences, and the discourses of the irreversible wheel of the Dharma. That is the fourth strange and wonderful thing.

Furthermore, reverend Śāriputra, in this house one always hears the rhythms, songs, and music of gods and men, and from this music constantly resounds the sound of the infinite Dharma of the Buddha. That is the fifth strange and wonderful thing.

Furthermore, reverend Śāriputra, in this house there are always four inexhaustible treasures, replete with all kinds of jewels, which never decrease, although all the poor and wretched may partake of them to their satisfaction. That is the sixth strange and wonderful thing.

Furthermore, reverend Śāriputra, at the wish of this good man, to this house come the innumerable Tathāgatas of the ten directions, such as the Tathāgatas Śākyamuni, Amitābha, Akṣobhya, Ratnaśrī, Ratnārcis, Ratnacandra, Ratnavyūha, Duḥprasāha, Sarvārthasiddha, Prabhūtaratna, Siṃhanādanādī, Siṃhaghoṣa, and so forth; and when they come they teach the door of Dharma called *The Secrets of the Tathāgatas*, and then depart. That is the seventh strange and wonderful thing.

Furthermore, reverend Śāriputra, all the splendors of the abodes of the gods and all the splendors of the fields of the buddhas shine forth in this house. That is the eighth strange and wonderful thing.

Reverend Śāriputra, these eight strange and wonderful things are seen in this house. Who then, seeing such inconceivable things, would believe the

teaching of the disciples?

*Śāriputra:* Goddess, what prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?

*Goddess:* Although I have sought my “female state” for these twelve years, I have not yet found it. Reverend Śāriputra, if a magician were to incarnate a woman by magic, would you ask her, “What prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?”

*Śāriputra:* No! Such a woman would not really exist, so what would there be to transform?

*Goddess:* Just so, reverend Śāriputra, all things do not really exist. Now, would you think, “What prevents one whose nature is that of a magical incarnation from transforming herself out of her female state?”

Thereupon, the goddess employed her magical power to cause the elder Śāriputra to appear in her form and to cause herself to appear in his form. Then the goddess, transformed into Śāriputra, said to Śāriputra, transformed into a goddess, “Reverend Śāriputra, what prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?”

And Śāriputra, transformed into the goddess, replied, “I no longer appear in the form of a male! My body has changed into the body of a woman! I do not know what to transform!”

The goddess continued, “If the elder could again change out of the female state, then all women could also change out of their female states. All women appear in the form of women in just the same way as the elder appears in the form of a woman. While they are not women in reality, they appear in the form of women. With this in mind, the Buddha said, ‘In all things, there is neither male nor female.’ ”

Then, the goddess released her magical power and each returned to his ordinary form. She then said to him, “Reverend Śāriputra, what have you done with your female form?”

*Śāriputra:* I neither made it nor did I change it.

*Goddess:* Just so, all things are neither made nor changed, and that they are not made and not changed, that is the teaching of the Buddha.

*Śāriputra:* Goddess, where will you be born when you transmigrate after death?

*Goddess:* I will be born where all the magical incarnations of the Tathāgata are born.

*Śāriputra:* But the emanated incarnations of the Tathāgata do not transmigrate nor are they born.

*Goddess:* All things and living beings are just the same; they do not transmigrate nor are they born!

*Śāriputra:* Goddess, how soon will you attain the perfect enlightenment of buddhahood?

*Goddess:* At such time as you, elder, become endowed once more with the qualities of an ordinary individual, then will I attain the perfect enlightenment of buddhahood.

*Śāriputra:* Goddess, it is impossible that I should become endowed once more with the qualities of an ordinary individual.

*Goddess:* Just so, reverend Śāriputra, it is impossible that I should attain the perfect enlightenment of buddhahood! Why? Because perfect enlightenment stands upon the impossible. Because it is impossible, no one attains the perfect enlightenment of buddhahood.

*Śāriputra:* But the Tathāgata has declared: “The tathāgatas, who are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, have attained perfect buddhahood, are attaining perfect buddhahood, and will go on attaining perfect buddhahood.”

*Goddess:* Reverend Śāriputra, the expression, “the buddhas of the past, present and future,” is a conventional expression made up of a certain number of syllables. The buddhas are neither past, nor present, nor future. Their enlightenment transcends the three times! But tell me, elder, have you attained the state of arhat?

*Śāriputra:* It is attained, because there is no attainment.

*Goddess:* Just so, there is perfect enlightenment because there is no attainment of perfect enlightenment.

Then the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to the venerable elder Śāriputra, “Reverend Śāriputra, this goddess has already served ninety-two million billion buddhas. She plays with the superknowledges. She has truly succeeded in all her vows. She has gained the tolerance of the birthlessness of things. She has actually attained irreversibility. She can live wherever she wishes on the strength of her vow to develop living beings.”

## The Family of the Tathāgatas

Then, the crown prince Mañjuśrī said to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, “Noble sir, how does the bodhisattva follow the way to attain the qualities of the Buddha?”

Vimalakīrti replied, “Mañjuśrī, when the bodhisattva follows the wrong way, he follows the way to attain the qualities of the Buddha.”

Mañjuśrī continued, “How does the bodhisattva follow the wrong way?”

Vimalakīrti replied, “Even should he enact the five deadly sins, he feels no malice, violence, or hate. Even should he go into the hells, he remains free of all taint of afflictions. Even should he go into the states of the animals, he remains free of darkness and ignorance. When he goes into the states of the asuras, he remains free of pride, conceit, and arrogance. When he goes into the realm of the lord of death, he accumulates the stores of merit and wisdom. When he goes into the states of motionlessness and immateriality, he does not dissolve therein.

“He may follow the ways of desire, yet he stays free of attachment to the enjoyments of desire. He may follow the ways of hatred, yet he feels no anger to any living being. He may follow the ways of folly, yet he is ever conscious with the wisdom of firm understanding.

“He may follow the ways of avarice, yet he gives away all internal and external things without regard even for his own life. He may follow the ways of immorality, yet, seeing the horror of even the slightest transgressions, he lives by the ascetic practices and austerities. He may follow the ways of wickedness and anger, yet he remains utterly free of malice and lives by love. He may follow the ways of laziness, yet his efforts are uninterrupted as he strives in the cultivation of roots of virtue. He may follow the ways of sensuous distraction, yet, naturally concentrated, his contemplation is not dissipated. He may follow the ways of false wisdom, yet, having reached the transcendence of wisdom, he is expert in all mundane and transcendental sciences.

“He may show the ways of sophistry and contention, yet he is always conscious of ultimate meanings and has perfected the use of liberative arts. He may show the ways of pride, yet he serves as a bridge and a ladder for all people. He may show the ways of the passions, yet he is utterly dispassionate and naturally pure. He may follow the ways of the Māras, yet he does not

really accept their authority in regard to his knowledge of the qualities of the Buddha. He may follow the ways of the disciples, yet he lets living beings hear the teaching they have not heard before. He may follow the ways of the solitary sages, yet he is inspired with great compassion in order to develop all living beings.

“He may follow the ways of the poor, yet he holds in his hand a jewel of inexhaustible wealth. He may follow the ways of cripples, yet he is beautiful and well adorned with the auspicious signs and marks. He may follow the ways of those of lowly birth, yet, through his accumulation of the stores of merit and wisdom, he is born in the family of the tathāgatas. He may follow the ways of the weak, the ugly, and the wretched, yet he is beautiful to look upon, and his body is like that of Nārāyana.

“He may manifest to living beings the ways of the sick and the unhappy, yet he has entirely conquered and transcended the fear of death.

“He may follow the ways of the rich, yet he is without acquisitiveness and often reflects upon the notion of impermanence. He may show himself engaged in dancing with harem girls, yet he cleaves to solitude, having crossed the swamp of desire.

“He follows the ways of the dumb and the incoherent, yet, having acquired the power of incantations, he is adorned with a varied eloquence.

“He follows the ways of the outsiders without ever becoming an outsider. He follows the ways of all the world, yet he reverses all states of existence. He follows the way of liberation without ever abandoning the progress of the world.

“Mañjuśrī, thus does the bodhisattva follow the wrong ways, thereby following the way to the qualities of the Buddha.”

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to the crown prince Mañjuśrī, “Mañjuśrī, what is the ‘family of the tathāgatas?’”

Mañjuśrī replied, “Noble sir, the family of the tathāgatas consists of all basic egoism; of ignorance and the thirst for existence; of lust, hate, and folly; of the four misapprehensions, of the five obscurations, of the six sense-media, of the seven abodes of consciousness, of the eight perverse paths, of the nine causes of irritation, of the paths of ten sins. Such is the family of the tathāgatas. In short, noble sir, the sixty-two kinds of convictions constitute the family of the tathāgatas!”

*Vimalakīrti:* Mañjuśrī, with what in mind do you say so?

*Mañjuśrī*: Noble sir, one who stays in the fixed determination of the vision of the uncreated is not capable of conceiving the spirit of unexcelled perfect enlightenment. However, one who lives among created things, in the mines of passions, without seeing any truth, is indeed capable of conceiving the spirit of unexcelled perfect enlightenment.

Noble sir, flowers like the blue lotus, the red lotus, the white lotus, the water lily, and the moon lily do not grow on the dry ground in the wilderness, but do grow in the swamps and mud banks. Just so, the buddha-qualities do not grow in living beings certainly destined for the uncreated but do grow in those living beings who are like swamps and mud banks of passions. Likewise, as seeds do not grow in the sky but do grow in the earth, so the buddha-qualities do not grow in those determined for the absolute but do grow in those who conceive the spirit of enlightenment, after having produced a Sumeru-like mountain of egoistic views.

Noble sir, through these considerations one can understand that all passions constitute the family of the Tathāgatas. Just as, noble sir, without going out into the great ocean, it is impossible to find precious, priceless pearls, so likewise, without going into the ocean of passions, it is impossible to obtain the mind of omniscience.

Then, the elder Mahākāśyapa applauded the crown prince Mañjuśrī: “Good! Good, Mañjuśrī! This is indeed well spoken! This is right! The passions do indeed constitute the family of the tathāgatas. How can such as we, the disciples, conceive the spirit of enlightenment, or become fully enlightened in regard to the qualities of the Buddha? Only those guilty of the five deadly sins can conceive the spirit of enlightenment and can attain buddhahood, which is the full accomplishment of the qualities of the Buddha!

“Just as the five desire objects have no impression or effect on those bereft of faculties, in the same way all the qualities of the Buddha have no impression or effect on the disciples, who have abandoned all adherences. Thus, the disciples can never appreciate those qualities.

“Therefore, Mañjuśrī, the ordinary individual is grateful to the Tathāgata, but the disciples are not grateful. Why? The ordinary individuals, upon learning of the virtues of the Buddha, conceive the spirit of unexcelled perfect enlightenment, in order to insure the uninterrupted continuity of the heritage of the Three Jewels; but the disciples, although they may hear of the qualities, powers, and fearlessnesses of the Buddha until the end of their days,

are not capable of conceiving the spirit of unexcelled perfect enlightenment.”

Thereupon, the bodhisattva Sarvarūpasamdarśana, who was present in that assembly, addressed the Licchavi Vimalakīrti: “Householder, where are your father and mother, your children, your wife, your servants, your maids, your laborers, and your attendants? Where are your friends, your relatives, and your kinsmen? Where are your servants, your horses, your elephants, your chariots, your bodyguards, and your bearers?”

Thus addressed, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti spoke the following verses to the bodhisattva Sarvarūpasamdarśana:

Of the true bodhisattvas,  
The mother is the transcendence of wisdom,  
The father is the skill in liberative technique;  
The leaders are born of such parents.

Their wife is the joy in the Dharma,  
Love and compassion are their daughters,  
The Dharma and the truth are their sons;  
And their home is deep thought on the meaning of voidness.

All the passions are their disciples,  
Controlled at will.  
Their friends are the aids to enlightenment;  
Thereby they realize supreme enlightenment.

Their companions, ever with them,  
Are the six transcendences.  
Their consorts are the means of unification,  
Their music is the teaching of the Dharma.

The incantations make their garden,  
Which blossoms with the flowers of the factors of  
enlightenment,  
With trees of the great wealth of the Dharma,  
And fruits of the gnosis of liberation.  
Their pool consists of the eight liberations,

Filled with the water of concentration,  
Covered with the lotuses of the seven purities—  
Who bathes therein becomes immaculate.

Their bearers are the six superknowledges,  
Their vehicle is the unexcelled Mahāyāna,  
Their driver is the spirit of enlightenment,  
And their path is the eightfold peace.

Their ornaments are the auspicious signs,  
And the eighty marks;  
Their garland is virtuous aspiration,  
And their clothing is good conscience and  
consideration.

Their wealth is the holy Dharma,  
And their business is its teaching,  
Their great income is pure practice,  
And it is dedicated to the supreme  
enlightenment.

Their bed consists of the four contemplations,  
And its spread is the pure livelihood,  
And their awakening consists of gnosis,  
Which is constant learning and meditation.

Their food is the ambrosia of the teachings,  
And their drink is the juice of liberation.  
Their bath is pure aspiration,  
And morality their unguent and perfume.

Having conquered the enemy afflictions,  
They are the invincible heroes.  
Having subdued the four Māras,  
They raise their standard on the field  
of enlightenment.  
They manifest birth voluntarily,

Yet they are not born, nor do they originate.  
They shine in all the fields of the buddhas,  
Just like the rising sun.

Though they worship buddhas by the millions,  
With every conceivable offering,  
They never dwell upon the least difference  
Between the buddhas and themselves.

They journey through all buddhafiels  
In order to bring benefit to living beings,  
Yet they see those fields as just like empty space,  
Free of any conceptual notions of “living beings.”

The fearless bodhisattvas can manifest,  
All in a single instant,  
The forms, sounds, and manners of behavior  
Of all living beings.

Although they recognize the deeds of Māras,  
They can get along even with these Māras;  
For even such activities may be manifested  
By those perfected in liberative art.

They play with illusory manifestations  
In order to develop living beings,  
Showing themselves to be old or sick,  
And even manifesting their own deaths.

They demonstrate the burning of the earth  
In the consuming flames of the world’s end,  
In order to demonstrate impermanence  
To living beings convinced about permanence.

Invited by hundreds of thousands of living beings,  
All in the same country,  
They partake of offerings at the homes of all,

And dedicate all for the sake of enlightenment.  
They excel in all esoteric sciences,  
And in the many different crafts,  
And they bring forth the happiness  
Of all living beings.

By devoting themselves as monks  
To all the strange sects of the world,  
They develop all those beings  
Who have attached themselves to dogmatic views.

They may become suns or moons,  
Indras, Brahmās, or lords of creatures,  
They may become fire or water  
Or earth or wind.

During the short eons of maladies,  
They become the best holy medicine;  
They make beings well and happy,  
And bring about their liberation.

During the short eons of famine,  
They become food and drink.  
Having first alleviated thirst and hunger,  
They teach the Dharma to living beings.

During the short eons of swords,  
They meditate on love,  
Introducing to nonviolence  
Hundreds of millions of living beings.

In the middle of great battles  
They remain impartial to both sides;  
For bodhisattvas of great strength  
Delight in reconciliation of conflict.

In order to help living beings,

They voluntarily descend  
Into the hells which are attached  
To all the inconceivable buddhafi elds.

They manifest their lives  
In all the species of the animal kingdom,  
Teaching the Dharma everywhere.  
Thus they are called “leaders.”

They display sensual enjoyment to the worldlings,  
And trances to the meditative.  
They completely conquer the Māras,  
And allow them no chance to prevail.

Just as displaying a lotus  
Amidst a fire is miraculous,  
So they display the miracles  
Of both pleasures and trances.

They intentionally become courtesans  
In order to win men over,  
And, having caught them with the hook of desire,  
They establish them in the buddha-gnosis.

In order to help living beings,  
They always become chieftains,  
Captains, priests, and ministers,  
Or even prime ministers.

For the sake of the poor,  
They become inexhaustible treasures,  
Causing those to whom they give their gifts  
To conceive the spirit of enlightenment.

They become invincible champions,  
For the sake of the proud and the vain,  
And, having conquered all their pride,

They start them on the quest for enlightenment.

They always stand at the head  
Of those terrified with fright,  
And, having bestowed fearlessness upon them,  
They develop them toward enlightenment.

They become great holy men,  
With the superknowledges and pure continence,  
And thus induce living beings to the morality  
Of tolerance, gentleness, and discipline.

Here in the world, they fearlessly behold  
Those who are masters to be served,  
And they become their servants or slaves,  
Or serve as their disciples.

Well trained in liberative art,  
They demonstrate all activities,  
Whichever possibly may be a method  
To make beings delight in the Dharma.

Their practices are infinite;  
And their spheres of influence are infinite;  
Having perfected an infinite wisdom,  
They liberate an infinity of living beings.

Even for the buddhas themselves,  
During a million eons,  
Or even a hundred million eons,  
It would be hard to express all their virtues.

Except for some inferior living beings,  
Without any intelligence at all,  
Is there anyone with any discernment  
Who, having heard this teaching,  
Would not wish for the supreme enlightenment?

## The Dharma-Door of Nonduality

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti asked those bodhisattvas, “Good sirs, please explain how the bodhisattvas enter the Dharma-door of nonduality!”

The bodhisattva Dharmavikurvaṇa declared, “Noble sir, production and destruction are two, but what is not produced and does not occur cannot be destroyed. Thus the attainment of the tolerance of the birthlessness of things is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Śrīgupta declared, “‘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.”

The bodhisattva Śrīkūṭa declared, “‘Defilement’ and ‘purification’ are two. When there is thorough knowledge of defilement, there will be no conceit about purification. The path leading to the complete conquest of all conceit is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Sunakṣatra declared, “‘Distraction’ and ‘attention’ are two. When there is no distraction, there will be no attention, no mentation, and no mental intensity. Thus, the absence of mental intensity is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Subāhu declared, “‘Bodhisattva spirit’ and ‘disciple spirit’ are two. When both are seen to resemble an illusory spirit, there is no bodhisattva-spirit, nor any disciple spirit. Thus, the sameness of natures of spirits is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Animiṣa declared, “‘Grasping’ and ‘nongrasping’ are two. What is not grasped is not perceived, and what is not perceived is neither presumed nor repudiated. Thus, the inaction and non-involvement of all things is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Sunetra declared, “‘Uniqueness’ and ‘characterlessness’ are two. Not to presume or construct something is neither to establish its uniqueness nor to establish its characterlessness. To penetrate the equality of these two is to enter nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Puṣya declared, “‘Good’ and ‘evil’ are two. Seeking neither good nor evil, the understanding of the nonduality of the significant and the meaningless is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Siṃha declared, “‘Sinfulness’ and ‘sinlessness’ are two. By means of the diamond-like wisdom that pierces to the quick, not to be bound or liberated is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Siṃhamati declared, “To say, ‘this is impure’ and ‘this is immaculate’ makes for duality. One who, attaining equanimity, forms no conception of impurity or immaculateness, yet is not utterly without conception, has equanimity without any attainment of equanimity—he enters the absence of conceptual knots. Thus, he enters into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Sukhādhimukta declared, “To say, ‘this is happiness’ and ‘that is misery’ is dualism. One who is free of all calculations, through the extreme purity of gnosis—his mind is aloof, like empty space; and thus he enters into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Nārāyana declared, “To say, ‘this is mundane’ and ‘that is transcendental’ is dualism. This world has the nature of voidness, so there is neither transcendence nor involvement, neither progress nor standstill. Thus, neither to transcend nor to be involved, neither to go nor to stop—this is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Dāntamati declared, “‘Life’ and ‘liberation’ are dualistic. Having seen the nature of life, one neither belongs to it nor is one utterly liberated from it. Such understanding is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Pratyakṣadarśa declared, “‘Destructible’ and ‘indestructible’ are dualistic. What is destroyed is ultimately destroyed. What is ultimately destroyed does not become destroyed; hence, it is called ‘indestructible.’ What is indestructible is instantaneous, and what is instantaneous is indestructible. The experience of such is called ‘the entrance into the principle of nonduality.’”

The bodhisattva Samantagupta declared, “‘Self’ and ‘selflessness’ are dualistic. Since the existence of self cannot be perceived, what is there to be made ‘selfless’? Thus, the nondual vision of their nature is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Vidyuddeva declared, “‘Knowledge’ and ‘ignorance’ are dualistic. The natures of ignorance and knowledge are the same, for ignorance is undefined, incalculable, and beyond the sphere of thought. The realization of this is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Priyadarśana declared, “Matter itself is void. Voidness does not result from the destruction of matter, but the nature of matter is itself voidness. Therefore, to speak of voidness on the one hand, and of

matter, or of sensation, or of intellect, or of motivation, or of consciousness on the other—is entirely dualistic. Consciousness itself is voidness. Voidness does not result from the destruction of consciousness, but the nature of consciousness is itself voidness. Such understanding of the five compulsive aggregates and the knowledge of them as such by means of gnosis is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Prabhāketu declared, “To say that the four main elements are one thing and the etheric space-element another is dualistic. The four main elements are themselves the nature of space. The past itself is also the nature of space. The future itself is also the nature of space. Likewise, the present itself is also the nature of space. The gnosis that penetrates the elements in such a way is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Sumati declared, “‘Eye’ and ‘form’ are dualistic. To understand the eye correctly, and not to have attachment, aversion, or confusion with regard to form—that is called ‘peace.’ Similarly, ‘ear’ and ‘sound,’ ‘nose’ and ‘smell,’ ‘tongue’ and ‘taste,’ ‘body’ and ‘touch,’ and ‘mind’ and ‘phenomena’—all are dualistic. But to know the mind, and to be neither attached, averse, nor confused with regard to phenomena—that is called ‘peace.’ To live in such peace is to enter into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Akṣayamati declared, “The dedication of generosity for the sake of attaining omniscience is dualistic. The nature of generosity is itself omniscience, and the nature of omniscience itself is total dedication. Likewise, it is dualistic to dedicate morality, tolerance, effort, meditation, and wisdom for the sake of omniscience. Omniscience is the nature of wisdom, and total dedication is the nature of omniscience. Thus, the entrance into this principle of uniqueness is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Gambhīrabuddhi declared, “It is dualistic to say that voidness is one thing, signlessness another, and wishlessness still another. What is void has no sign. What has no sign has no wish. Where there is no wish there is no process of thought, mind, or consciousness. To see the doors of all liberations in the door of one liberation is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Sāntendriya declared, “It is dualistic to say ‘Buddha,’ ‘Dharma,’ and ‘Saṅgha.’ The Dharma is itself the nature of the Buddha, the Saṅgha is itself the nature of the Dharma, and all of them are uncompounded. The uncompounded is infinite space, and the processes of all things are equivalent to infinite space. Adjustment to this is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Apratihatacakṣu declared, “It is dualistic to refer to ‘aggregates’ and to the ‘cessation of aggregates.’ Aggregates themselves are cessation. Why? The egoistic views of aggregates, being unproduced themselves, do not exist ultimately. Hence such views do not really conceptualize ‘these are aggregates’ or ‘these aggregates cease.’ Ultimately, they have no such discriminative constructions and no such conceptualizations. Therefore, such views have themselves the nature of cessation. Nonoccurrence and nondestruction are the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Suvīṇita declared, “Physical, verbal, and mental vows do not exist dualistically. Why? These things have the nature of inactivity. The nature of inactivity of the body is the same as the nature of inactivity of speech, whose nature of inactivity is the same as the nature of inactivity of the mind. It is necessary to know and to understand this fact of the ultimate inactivity of all things, for this knowledge is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Puṇyakṣetra declared, “It is dualistic to consider actions meritorious, sinful, or unmoving. The non-undertaking of meritorious, sinful, and unmoving actions is not dualistic. The intrinsic nature of all such actions is voidness, wherein ultimately there is neither merit, nor sin, nor non-movement, nor action itself. The nonaccomplishment of such actions is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Padmavyūha declared, “Dualism is produced from obsession with self, but true understanding of self does not result in dualism. Who thus abides in nonduality is without ideation, and that absence of ideation is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Śrīgarbha declared, “Duality is constituted by perceptual manifestation. Nonduality is objectlessness. Therefore, nongrasping and nonrejection is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Candrottara declared, “‘Darkness’ and ‘light’ are dualistic, but the absence of both darkness and light is nonduality. Why? At the time of absorption in cessation, there is neither darkness nor light, and likewise with the natures of all things. The entrance into this equanimity is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Ratnamudrāhastā declared, “It is dualistic to detest the world and to rejoice in liberation, and neither detesting the world nor rejoicing in liberation is nonduality. Why? Liberation can be found where there is bondage, but where there is ultimately no bondage where is there

need for liberation? The mendicant who is neither bound nor liberated does not experience any like or any dislike and thus he enters nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Mañikūṭarāja declared, “It is dualistic to speak of good paths and bad paths. One who is on the path is not concerned with good or bad paths. Living in such unconcern, he entertains no concepts of ‘path’ or ‘nonpath.’ Understanding the nature of concepts, his mind does not engage in duality. Such is the entrance into nonduality.”

The bodhisattva Satyananda declared, “It is dualistic to speak of ‘true’ and ‘false.’ When one sees truly, one does not ever see any truth, so how could one see falsehood? Why? One does not see with the physical eye, one sees with the eye of wisdom. And with the wisdom-eye one sees only insofar as there is neither sight nor nonsight. There, where there is neither sight nor nonsight, is the entrance into nonduality.”

When the bodhisattvas had given their explanations, they all addressed the crown prince Mañjuśrī: “Mañjuśrī, what is the bodhisattva’s entrance into nonduality?”

Mañjuśrī replied, “Good sirs, you have all spoken well. Nevertheless, all your explanations are themselves dualistic. To know no one teaching, to express nothing, to say nothing, to explain nothing, to announce nothing, to indicate nothing, and to designate nothing—that is the entrance into nonduality.”

Then, the crown prince Mañjuśrī said to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, “We have all given our own teachings, noble sir. Now, may you elucidate the teaching of the entrance into the principle of nonduality!”

Thereupon, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti kept his silence, saying nothing at all. The crown prince Mañjuśrī applauded the Licchavi Vimalakīrti: “Excellent! Excellent, noble sir! This is indeed the entrance into the nonduality of the bodhisattvas. Here there is no use for syllables, sounds, and ideas.”

When these teachings had been declared, five thousand bodhisattvas entered the door of the Dharma of nonduality and attained tolerance of the birthlessness of things.

## The Feast Brought by the Emanated Incarnation

Thereupon, the venerable Śāriputra thought to himself, “If these great bodhisattvas do not adjourn before noontime, when are they going to eat?”

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti, aware of what the venerable Śāriputra was thinking, spoke to him: “Reverend Śāriputra, the Tathāgata has taught the eight liberations. You should concentrate on those liberations, listening to the Dharma with a mind free of preoccupations with material things. Just wait a minute, reverend Śāriputra, and you will eat such food as you have never before tasted.”

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti set himself in such a concentration and performed such a miraculous feat that those bodhisattvas and those great disciples were enabled to see the universe called Sarvagandhasugandhā, which is located in the direction of the zenith, beyond as many buddhafi elds as there are sands in forty-two Ganges rivers. There the tathāgata named Gandhottamakūṭa resides, lives, and is manifest. In that universe, the trees emit a fragrance that far surpasses all the fragrances, human and divine, of all the buddhafi elds of the ten directions. In that universe, even the names “disciple” and “solitary sage” do not exist, and the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa teaches the Dharma to a gathering of bodhisattvas only. In that universe, all the houses, the avenues, the parks, and the palaces are made of various perfumes, and the fragrance of the food eaten by those bodhisattvas pervades immeasurable universes.

At this time, the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa sat down with his bodhisattvas to take his meal, and the deities called Gandhavyūhāhāra, who were all devoted to the Mahāyāna, served and attended upon that Buddha and his bodhisattvas. Everyone in the gathering at the house of Vimalakīrti was able to see distinctly this universe wherein the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa and his bodhisattvas were taking their meal.

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti addressed the whole gathering of bodhisattvas: “Good sirs, is there any among you who would like to go to that buddhafi eld to bring back some food?”

But, restrained by the supernatural power of Mañjuśrī, none of them volunteered to go.

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to the crown prince Mañjuśrī, “Mañjuśrī, are you not ashamed of such a gathering?”

Mañjuśrī replied, “Noble sir, did not the Tathāgata declare, ‘Those who are unlearned should not be despised’?”

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, without rising from his couch, magically emanated an incarnation-bodhisattva, whose body was of golden color, adorned with the auspicious signs and marks, and of such an appearance that he outshone the whole assembly.

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti addressed that incarnated bodhisattva: “Noble son, go in the direction of the zenith and when you have crossed as many buddhafields as there are sands in forty-two Ganges rivers, you will reach a universe called Sarvagandhasugandhā, where you will find the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa taking his meal. Go to him and, having bowed down at his feet, make the following request of him:

“‘The Licchavi Vimalakīrti bows down one hundred thousand times at your feet, O Lord, and asks after your health—if you have but little trouble, little discomfort, little unrest; if you are strong, well, without complaint, and living in touch with supreme happiness.’

“Having thus asked after his health, you should request of him: ‘Vimalakīrti asks the Lord to give me the remains of your meal, with which he will accomplish the buddha-work in the universe called Sahā. Thus, those living beings with inferior aspirations will be inspired with lofty aspirations, and the good name of the Tathāgata will be celebrated far and wide.’”

At that, the incarnated bodhisattva said, “Very good!” to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti and obeyed his instructions. In sight of all the bodhisattvas, he turned his face upward and was gone, and they saw him no more.

When he reached the universe Sarvagandhasugandhā, he bowed down at the feet of the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa and said, “Lord, the bodhisattva Vimalakīrti, bowing down at the feet of the Lord, greets the Lord, saying: ‘Do you have little trouble, little discomfort, and little unrest? Are you strong, well, without complaint, and living in touch with the supreme happiness?’ He then requests, having bowed down one hundred thousand times at the feet of the Lord: ‘May the Lord be gracious and give to me the remains of his meal in order to accomplish the buddha-work in the universe called Sahā. Then, those living beings who aspire to inferior ways may gain the intelligence to aspire to the great Dharma of the Buddha, and the name of the Buddha will be celebrated far and wide.’ ”

At that the bodhisattvas of the buddhafiield of the Tathāgata GandhottamakūṭawereastonishedandaskedtheTathāgataGandhottamakūṭa, “Lord, where is there such a great being as this ? Where is the universe Sahā? What does he mean by ‘those who aspire to inferior ways?’”

Having thus been questioned by those bodhisattvas, the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa said, “Noble sons, the universe Sahā exists beyond as many buddhafiields in the direction of the nadir as there are sands in forty-two Ganges rivers. There the Tathāgata Śākyamuni teaches the Dharma to living beings who aspire to inferior ways, in that buddhafiield tainted with five corruptions. There the bodhisattva Vimalakīrti, who lives in the inconceivable liberation, teaches the Dharma to the bodhisattvas. He sends this incarnation-bodhisattva here in order to celebrate my name, in order to show the advantages of this universe, and in order to increase the roots of virtue of those bodhisattvas.”

The bodhisattvas exclaimed, “How great must that bodhisattva be himself if his magical incarnation is thus endowed with supernatural power, strength, and fearlessness!”

The Tathāgata said, “The greatness of that bodhisattva is such that he sends magical incarnations to all the buddhafiields of the ten directions, and all these incarnations accomplish the buddha-work for all the living beings in all those buddhafiields.”

Then, the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa poured some of his food, impregnated with all perfumes, into a fragrant vessel and gave it to the incarnation-bodhisattva. And the ninety million bodhisattvas of that universe volunteered to go along with him: “Lord, we also would like to go to that universe Sahā, to see, honor, and serve the Buddha Śākyamuni and to see Vimalakīrti and those bodhisattvas.”

The Tathāgata declared, “Noble sons, go ahead if you think it is the right time. But, lest those living beings become mad and intoxicated, go without your perfumes. And, lest those living beings of the Sahā world become jealous of you, change your bodies to hide your beauty. And do not conceive ideas of contempt and aversion for that universe. Why? Noble sons, a buddhafiield is a field of pure space, but the lord buddhas, in order to develop living beings, do not reveal all at once the pure realm of the Buddha.”

Then the incarnation-bodhisattva took the food and departed with the ninety million bodhisattvas and, by the power of the Buddha and the supernatural operation of Vimalakīrti, disappeared from that universe

Sarvagandhasugandhā and stood again in the house of Vimalakīrti in a fraction of a second. The Licchavi Vimalakīrti created ninety million lion-thrones exactly like those already there, and the bodhisattvas were seated.

Then, the incarnation-bodhisattva gave the vessel full of food to Vimalakīrti, and the fragrance of that food permeated the entire great city of Vaiśālī and its sweet perfume spread throughout one hundred universes. Within the city of Vaiśālī, the brahmans, householders, and even the Licchavi chieftain Candracchatra, having noticed this fragrance, were amazed and filled with wonder. They were so cleansed in body and mind that they came at once to the house of Vimalakīrti, along with all eighty-four thousand of the Licchavis.

Seeing there the bodhisattvas seated on the high, wide, and beautiful lion-thrones, they were filled with admiration and great joy. They all bowed down to those great disciples and bodhisattvas and then sat down to one side. And the gods of the earth, the gods of the realm of desire, and the gods of the realm of pure matter, attracted by the perfume, also came to the house of Vimalakīrti.

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti spoke to the elder Śāriputra and the great disciples: “Reverends, eat of the food of the Tathāgata! It is ambrosia perfumed by the great compassion. But do not fix your minds in narrow-minded attitudes, lest you be unable to receive its gift.”

But some of the disciples had already had the thought: “How can such a huge multitude eat such a small amount of food?”

Then the incarnation-bodhisattva said to those disciples, “Do not compare, venerable ones, your own wisdom and merits with the wisdom and the merits of the Tathāgata! Why? For example, the four great oceans might dry up, but this food would never be exhausted. If all living beings were to eat for an eon an amount of this food equal to Mount Sumeru in size, it would not be depleted. Why? Issued from inexhaustible morality, concentration, and wisdom, the remains of the food of the Tathāgata contained in this vessel cannot be exhausted.”

Indeed, the entire gathering was satisfied by that food, and the food was not at all depleted. Having eaten that food, there arose in the bodies of those bodhisattvas, disciples, Śakras, Brahmās, Lokapālas, and other living beings, a bliss just like the bliss of the bodhisattvas of the universe Sarvasukhapatimandita. And from all the pores of their skin arose a perfume like that of the trees that grow in the universe Sarvagandhasugandhā.

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti knowingly addressed those bodhisattvas who had come from the buddhafield of the Lord Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa: “Noble sirs, how does the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa teach his Dharma?”

They replied, “The Tathāgata does not teach the Dharma by means of sound and language. He disciplines the bodhisattvas only by means of perfumes. At the foot of each perfume-tree sits a bodhisattva, and the trees emit perfumes like this one. From the moment they smell that perfume, the bodhisattvas attain the concentration called ‘source of all bodhisattva-virtues.’ From the moment they attain that concentration, all the bodhisattvas-virtues are produced in them.”

Those bodhisattvas then asked the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, “How does the Buddha Śākyamuni teach the Dharma?”

Vimalakīrti replied, “Good sirs, these living beings here are hard to discipline. Therefore, he teaches them with discourses appropriate for the disciplining of the wild and uncivilized. How does he discipline the wild and uncivilized? What discourses are appropriate? Here they are:

“This is hell. This is the animal world. This is the world of the lord of death. These are the adversities. These are the rebirths with crippled faculties. These are physical misdeeds, and these are the retributions for physical misdeeds. These are verbal misdeeds, and these are the retributions for verbal misdeeds. These are mental misdeeds, and these are the retributions for mental misdeeds. This is killing. This is stealing. This is sexual misconduct. This is lying. This is backbiting. This is harsh speech. This is frivolous speech. This is covetousness. This is malice. This is false view. These are their retributions. This is miserliness, and this is its effect. This is immorality. This is hatred. This is sloth. This is the fruit of sloth. This is false wisdom and this is the fruit of false wisdom. These are the transgressions of the precepts. This is the vow of personal liberation. This should be done and that should not be done. This is proper and that should be abandoned. This is an obscuration and that is without obscuration. This is sin and that rises above sin. This is the path and that is the wrong path. This is virtue and that is evil. This is blameworthy and that is blameless. This is defiled and that is immaculate. This is mundane and that is transcendental. This is compounded and that is uncompounded. This is affliction and that is purification. This is life and that is liberation.’

“Thus, by means of these varied explanations of the Dharma, the Buddha trains the minds of those living beings who are just like wild horses. Just

as wild horses or wild elephants will not be tamed unless the goad pierces them to the marrow, so living beings who are wild and hard to civilize are disciplined only by means of discourses about all kinds of miseries.”

The bodhisattvas said, “Thus is established the greatness of the Buddha Śākyamuni! It is marvelous how, concealing his miraculous power, he civilizes the wild living beings who are poor and inferior. And the bodhisattvas who settle in a buddhafield of such intense hardships must have inconceivably great compassion!”

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti declared, “So it is, good sirs! It is as you say. The great compassion of the bodhisattvas who reincarnate here is extremely firm. In a single lifetime in this universe, they accomplish much benefit for living beings. So much benefit for living beings could not be accomplished in the universe Sarvagandhasugandhā even in one hundred thousand eons. Why? Good sirs, in this Sahā universe, there are ten virtuous practices which do not exist in any other buddhafield. What are these ten? Here they are: to win the poor by generosity; to win the immoral by morality; to win the hateful by means of tolerance; to win the lazy by means of effort; to win the mentally troubled by means of concentration; to win the falsely wise by means of true wisdom; to show those suffering from the eight adversities how to rise above them; to teach the Mahāyāna to those of narrow-minded attitudes; to win those who have not produced the roots of virtue by means of the roots of virtue; and to develop living beings without interruption through the four means of unification. Those who engage in these ten virtuous practices do not exist in any other buddhafield.”

Again the bodhisattvas asked, “How many qualities must a bodhisattva have, to go safe and sound to a pure buddhafield after he transmigrates at death away from this Sahā universe?”

Vimalakīrti replied, “After he transmigrates at death away from this Sahā universe, a bodhisattva must have eight qualities to reach a pure buddhafield safe and sound. What are the eight? He must resolve to himself: ‘I must benefit all living beings, without seeking even the slightest benefit for myself. I must bear all the miseries of all living beings and give all my accumulated roots of virtue to all living beings. I must have no resentment toward any living being. I must rejoice in all bodhisattvas as if they were the Teacher. I must not neglect any teachings, whether or not I have heard them before. I must control my mind, without coveting the gains of others, and without taking pride in gains of my own. I must examine my own faults and not

blame others for their faults. I must take pleasure in being consciously aware and must truly undertake all virtues.'

"If a bodhisattva has these eight qualities, when he transmigrates at death away from the Sahā universe, he will go safe and sound to a pure buddhahfield."

When the Licchavi Vimalakīrti and the crown prince Mañjuśrī had thus taught the Dharma to the multitude gathered there, one hundred thousand living beings conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment, and ten thousand bodhisattvas attained the tolerance of the birthlessness of things.

## Lesson of the Destructible and the Indestructible

Meanwhile, the area in which the Lord was teaching the Dharma in the garden of Āmrāpālī expanded and grew larger, and the entire assembly appeared tinged with a golden hue. Thereupon, the venerable Ānanda asked the Buddha, “Lord, this expansion and enlargement of the garden of Āmrāpālī and this golden hue of the assembly—what do these auspicious signs portend?”

The Buddha declared, “Ānanda, these auspicious signs portend that the Licchavi Vimalakīrti and the crown prince Mañjuśrī, attended by a great multitude, are coming into the presence of the Tathāgata.”

At that moment the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to the crown prince Mañjuśrī, “Mañjuśrī, let us take these many living beings into the presence of the Lord, so that they may see the Tathāgata and bow down to him!”

Mañjuśrī replied, “Noble sir, send them if you feel the time is right!”

Thereupon the Licchavi Vimalakīrti performed the miraculous feat of placing the entire assembly, replete with thrones, upon his right hand and then, having transported himself magically into the presence of the Buddha, placing it on the ground. He bowed down at the feet of the Buddha, circumambulated him to the right seven times with palms together, and withdrew to one side.

The bodhisattvas who had come from the buddhafield of the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa descended from their lion-thrones and, bowing down at the feet of the Buddha, placed their palms together in reverence and withdrew to one side. And the other bodhisattvas, great spiritual heroes, and the great disciples descended from their thrones likewise and, having bowed at the feet of the Buddha, withdrew to one side. Likewise all those Indras, Brahmās, Lokapālas, and gods bowed at the feet of the Buddha and withdrew to one side.

Then, the Buddha, having delighted those bodhisattvas with greetings, declared, “Noble sons, be seated upon your thrones!”

Thus commanded by the Buddha, they took their thrones.

The Buddha said to Śāriputra, “Śāriputra, did you see the miraculous performances of the bodhisattvas, those best of beings?”

“I have seen them, Lord.”

“What concept did you produce toward them?”

“Lord, I produced the concept of inconceivability toward them. Their activities appeared inconceivable to me to the point that I was unable to think of them, to judge them, or even to imagine them.”

Then the venerable Ānanda asked the Buddha, “Lord, what is this perfume, the likes of which I have never smelled before?”

The Buddha answered, “Ānanda, this perfume emanates from all the pores of all these bodhisattvas.”

Śāriputra added, “Venerable Ānanda, this same perfume emanates from all our pores as well!”

Ānanda: Where does the perfume come from?

Śāriputra: The Licchavi Vimalakīrti obtained some food from the universe called Sarvagandhasugandhā, the buddhafield of the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa, and this perfume emanates from the bodies of all those who partook of that food.

Then the venerable Ānanda addressed the Licchavi Vimalakīrti: “How long will this perfume remain?”

*Vimalakīrti:* Until it is digested.

*Ānanda:* When will it be digested?

*Vimalakīrti:* It will be digested in forty-nine days, and its perfume will emanate for seven days more after that, but there will be no trouble of indigestion during that time. Furthermore, reverend Ānanda, if monks who have not entered destiny for the ultimate eat this food, it will be digested when they enter that destiny. When those who have entered destiny for the ultimate eat this food, it will not be digested until their minds are totally liberated. If living beings who have not conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment eat this food, it will be digested when they conceive the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. If those who have conceived the spirit of perfect enlightenment eat this food, it will not be digested until they have attained tolerance. And if those who have attained tolerance eat this food, it will be digested when they have become bodhisattvas one lifetime away from buddhahood. Reverend Ānanda, it is like the medicine called “delicious,” which reaches the stomach but is not digested until all poisons have been eliminated—only then is it digested. Similarly, reverend Ānanda, this food is not digested until all the poisons of the afflictions have been eliminated—only then is it digested.

Then, the venerable Ānanda said to the Buddha, “Lord, it is wonderful that this food accomplishes the work of the Buddha!”

“So it is, Ānanda! It is as you say, Ānanda! There are buddhafi elds that accomplish the buddha-work by means of bodhisattvas; those that do so by means of lights; those that do so by means of the tree of enlightenment; those that do so by means of the physical beauty and the marks of the Tathāgata; those that do so by means of religious robes; those that do so by means of food; those that do so by means of water; those that do so by means of gardens; those that do so by means of palaces; those that do so by means of mansions; those that do so by means of magical incarnations; those that do so by means of empty space; and those that do so by means of lights in the sky. Why is it so, Ānanda? Because by these various means, living beings become disciplined. Similarly, Ānanda, there are buddhafi elds that accomplish the buddha-work by means of teaching living beings words, definitions, and analogies, such as ‘dreams,’ ‘images,’ the ‘reflection of the moon in water,’ ‘echoes,’ ‘illusions,’ and ‘mirages’; and those that accomplish the buddha-work by making words understandable. Also, Ānanda, there are utterly pure buddhafi elds that accomplish the buddha-work for living beings without speech, by silence, inexpressibility, and unteachability. Ānanda, among all the activities, enjoyments, and practices of the buddhas, there are none that do not accomplish the buddha-work, because all discipline living beings. Finally, Ānanda, the buddhas accomplish the buddha-work by means of the four Māras and all the eighty-four thousand types of passion that afflict living beings.

“Ānanda, this is a Dharma-door called *introduction to all the buddha-qualities*. The bodhisattva who enters this Dharma-door experiences neither joy nor pride when confronted by a buddhafi eld adorned with the splendor of all noble qualities, and experiences neither sadness nor aversion when confronted by a buddhafi eld apparently without that splendor, but in all cases produces a profound reverence for all the Tathāgatas. Indeed, it is wonderful how all the Lord Buddhas, who understand the equality of all things, manifest all sorts of buddhafi elds in order to develop living beings!

“Ānanda, just as the buddhafi elds are diverse as to their specific qualities but have no difference as to the sky that covers them, so, Ānanda, the tathāgatas are diverse as to their physical bodies but do not differ as to their unimpeded gnosis.

“Ānanda, all the buddhas are the same as to the perfection of their buddha-qualities: that is, their forms, their colors, their radiance, their

bodies, their marks, their nobility, their morality, their concentration, their wisdom, their liberation, their gnosis and vision of liberation, their strengths, their fearlessnesses, their special buddha-qualities, their great love, their great compassion, their helpful intentions, their attitudes, their practices, their paths, the lengths of their lives, their teachings of the Dharma, their development and liberation of living beings, and their purification of buddhafields. Therefore, they are all called ‘saṃyaksambuddhas,’ ‘tathāgatas,’ and ‘buddhas.’

“Ānanda, were your life to last an entire eon, it would not be easy for you to understand thoroughly the extensive meaning and precise verbal significance of these three names. Also, Ānanda, if all the living beings of this billion-world galactic universe were like you—the foremost of the learned and the foremost of those endowed with memory and incantations—and were they to devote an entire eon, they would still be unable to understand completely the exact and extensive meaning of the three words ‘saṃyaksambuddha,’ ‘tathāgata,’ and ‘buddha.’ Thus, Ānanda, the enlightenment of the Buddhas is immeasurable, and the wisdom and the eloquence of the Tathāgatas are inconceivable.”

Then, the venerable Ānanda addressed the Buddha: “Lord, from this day forth, I shall no longer declare myself to be the foremost of the learned.”

The Buddha said, “Do not be discouraged, Ānanda! Why? I pronounced you, Ānanda, the foremost of the learned, with the disciples in mind, not considering the bodhisattvas. Look, Ānanda, look at the bodhisattvas. They cannot be fathomed even by the wisest of men. Ānanda, one can fathom the depths of the ocean, but one cannot fathom the depths of the wisdom, gnosis, memory, incantations, or eloquence of the bodhisattvas. Ānanda, you should remain in equanimity with regard to the deeds of the bodhisattvas. Why? Ānanda, these marvels displayed in a single morning by the Licchavi Vimalakīrti could not be performed by the disciples and solitary sages who have attained miraculous powers, were they to devote all their powers of incarnation and transformation during one hundred thousand millions of eons.”

Then, all those bodhisattvas from the buddhafield of the Tathāgata Gandhottamakūṭa joined their palms in reverence and, saluting the Tathāgata Śākyamuni, addressed him as follows: “Lord, when we first arrived in this buddhafield, we conceived a negative idea, but we now abandon this wrong idea. Why? Lord, the realms of the buddhas and their skill in liberative art

are inconceivable. In order to develop living beings, they manifest such and such a field to suit the desire of such and such a living being. Lord, please give us a teaching by which we may remember you, when we have returned to Sarvagandhasugandhā.”

Thus having been requested, the Buddha declared, “Noble sons, there is a liberation of bodhisattvas called destructible and indestructible. You must train yourselves in this liberation. What is it? ‘Destructible’ refers to compounded things. ‘Indestructible’ refers to the un compounded. But the bodhisattva should neither destroy the compounded nor rest in the un compounded.

“Not to destroy compounded things consists in not losing the great love; not giving up the great compassion; not forgetting the omniscient mind generated by high resolve; not tiring in the positive development of living beings; not abandoning the means of unification; giving up body and life in order to uphold the holy Dharma; never being satisfied with the roots of virtue already accumulated; taking pleasure in skillful dedication; having no laziness in seeking the Dharma; being without selfish reticence in teaching the Dharma; sparing no effort in seeing and worshiping the tathāgatas; being fearless in voluntary reincarnations; being neither proud in success nor bowed in failure; not despising the unlearned, and respecting the learned as if they were the Teacher himself; making reasonable those whose passions are excessive; taking pleasure in solitude, without being attached to it; not longing for one’s own happiness but longing for the happiness of others; conceiving of trance, meditation, and equanimity as if they were the Avīci hell; conceiving of the world as a garden of liberation; considering beggars to be spiritual teachers; considering the giving away of all possessions to be the means of realizing buddhahood; considering immoral beings to be saviors; considering the transcendences to be parents; considering the aids to enlightenment to be servants; never ceasing accumulation of the roots of virtue; establishing the virtues of all buddhafields in one’s own buddhafield; offering limitless pure sacrifices to fulfill the auspicious marks and signs; adorning body, speech, and mind by refraining from all sins; continuing in reincarnations during immeasurable eons, while purifying body, speech, and mind; avoiding discouragement, through spiritual heroism, when learning of the immeasurable virtues of the Buddha; wielding the sharp sword of wisdom to chastise the enemy afflictions; knowing well the aggregates, the elements, and the sense-media in order to bear the burdens of all

living beings; blazing with energy to conquer the host of demons; seeking knowledge in order to avoid pride; being content with little desire in order to uphold the Dharma; not mixing with worldly things in order to delight all people; being faultless in all activities in order to conform to all people; producing the superknowledges to actually accomplish all duties of benefit to living beings; acquiring incantations, memory, and knowledge in order to retain all learning; understanding the degrees of people's spiritual faculties to dispel the doubts of all living beings; displaying invincible miraculous feats to teach the Dharma; having irresistible speech by acquiring unimpeded eloquence; tasting human and divine success by purifying the path of ten virtues; establishing the path of the pure states of Brahmā by cultivating the four immeasurables; inviting the buddhas to teach the Dharma, rejoicing in them, and applauding them, thereby obtaining the melodious voice of a buddha; disciplining body, speech, and mind, thus maintaining constant spiritual progress; being without attachment to anything and thus acquiring the behavior of a buddha; gathering together the order of bodhisattvas to attract beings to the Mahāyāna; and being consciously aware at all times not to neglect any good quality. Noble sons, a bodhisattva who thus applies himself to the Dharma is a bodhisattva who does not destroy the compounded realm.

“What is not resting in the uncompounded? The bodhisattva practices voidness, but he does not realize voidness. He practices signlessness but does not realize signlessness. He practices wishlessness but does not realize wishlessness. He practices non-performance but does not realize non-performance. He knows impermanence but is not complacent about his roots of virtue. He considers misery, but he reincarnates voluntarily. He knows selflessness, but does not waste himself. He considers peacefulness but does not seek extreme peace. He cherishes solitude but does not avoid mental and physical efforts. He considers placelessness but does not abandon the place of good actions. He considers occurrencelessness but undertakes to bear the burdens of all living beings. He considers immaculateness, yet he follows the process of the world. He considers motionlessness, yet he moves in order to develop all living beings. He considers selflessness, yet does not abandon the great compassion toward all living beings. He considers birthlessness, yet he does not fall into the ultimate determination of the disciples. He considers vanity, futility, insubstantiality, dependency, and placelessness, yet he establishes himself on merits that are not vain, on knowledge that is not

futile, on reflections that are substantial, on the striving for the consecration of the independent gnosis, and on the buddha lineage in its definitive meaning.

“Thus, noble sons, a bodhisattva who aspires to such a Dharma neither rests in the uncompounded nor destroys the compounded.

“Furthermore, noble sons, in order to accomplish the store of merit, a bodhisattva does not rest in the uncompounded, and, in order to accomplish the store of wisdom, he does not destroy the compounded. In order to fulfill the great love, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, in order to fulfill the great compassion, he does not destroy compounded things. In order to develop living beings, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, in order to aspire to the buddha-qualities, he does not destroy compounded things. To perfect the marks of buddhahood, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, to perfect the gnosis of omniscience, he does not destroy compounded things. Out of skill in liberative art, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, through thorough analysis with his wisdom, he does not destroy compounded things. To purify the buddhafield, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, by the power of the grace of the Buddha, he does not destroy compounded things. Because he feels the needs of living beings, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, in order to show truly the meaning of the Dharma, he does not destroy compounded things. Because of his store of roots of virtue, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, because of his instinctive enthusiasm for these roots of virtue, he does not destroy compounded things. To fulfill his prayers, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, because he has no wishes, he does not destroy compounded things. Because his positive thought is pure, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, because his high resolve is pure, he does not destroy compounded things. In order to play with the five superknowledges, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, because of the six superknowledges of the buddha-gnosis, he does not destroy compounded things. To fulfill the six transcendences, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, to fulfill the time, he does not destroy compounded things. To gather the treasures of the Dharma, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, because he does not like any narrow-minded teachings, he does not destroy compounded things. Because he gathers all the medicines of the Dharma, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, to apply the medicine of the Dharma appropriately, he does not destroy compounded things. To confirm his commitments,

he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, to mend any failure of these commitments, he does not destroy compounded things. To concoct all the medicines of the Dharma, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, to give out the medicine of even the smallest Dharma, he does not destroy compounded things. Because he knows thoroughly all the sicknesses due to passions, he does not rest in the uncompounded, and, in order to cure all sicknesses of all living beings, he does not destroy compounded things.

“Thus, noble sons, the bodhisattva does not destroy compounded things and does not rest in the uncompounded, and that is the liberation of bodhisattvas called *destructible and indestructible*. Noble sirs, you should also strive in this.”

Then, those bodhisattvas, having heard this teaching, were satisfied, delighted, and reverent. They were filled with rejoicing and happiness of mind. In order to worship the Buddha Śākyamuni and the bodhisattvas of the Sahā universe, as well as this teaching, they covered the whole earth of this billion-world universe with fragrant powder, incense, perfumes, and flowers up to the height of the knees. Having thus regaled the whole retinue of the Tathāgata, bowed their heads at the feet of the Buddha, and circumambulated him to the right three times, they sang a hymn of praise to him. They then disappeared from this universe and in a split second were back in the universe Sarvagandhasugandhā.

## Vision of the Universe Abhirati and the Tathāgata Akṣobhya

Thereupon, the Buddha said to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, “Noble son, when you would see the Tathāgata, how do you view him?”

Thus addressed, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti said to the Buddha, “Lord, when I would see the Tathāgata, I view him by not seeing any Tathāgata. Why? I see him as not born from the past, not passing on to the future, and not abiding in the present time. Why? He is the essence that is the reality of matter, but he is not matter. He is the essence that is the reality of sensation, but he is not sensation. He is the essence that is the reality of intellect, but he is not intellect. He is the essence that is the reality of performance, yet he is not performance. He is the essence that is the reality of consciousness, yet he is not consciousness. Like the element of space, he does not abide in any of the four elements. Transcending the scope of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, he is not produced in the six sense-media. He is not involved in the three worlds, is free of the three defilements, is associated with the triple liberation, is endowed with the three knowledges, and has truly attained the unattainable.

“The Tathāgata has reached the extreme of detachment in regard to all things, yet he is not a reality-limit. He abides in ultimate reality, yet there is no relationship between it and him. He is not produced from causes, nor does he depend on conditions. He is not without any characteristic, nor has he any characteristic. He has no single nature nor any diversity of natures. He is not a conception, not a mental construction, nor is he a non-conception. He is neither the other shore, nor this shore, nor that between. He is neither here, nor there, nor anywhere else. He is neither this nor that. He cannot be discovered by consciousness, nor is he inherent in consciousness. He is neither darkness nor light. He is neither name nor sign. He is neither weak nor strong. He lives in no country or direction. He is neither good nor evil. He is neither compounded nor un-compounded. He cannot be explained as having any meaning whatsoever.

“The Tathāgata is neither generosity nor avarice, neither morality nor immorality, neither tolerance nor malice, neither effort nor sloth, neither concentration nor distraction, neither wisdom nor foolishness. He is inexpressible. He is neither truth nor falsehood; neither escape from the world

nor failure to escape from the world; neither cause of involvement in the world nor not a cause of involvement in the world; he is the cessation of all theory and all practice. He is neither a field of merit nor not a field of merit; he is neither worthy of offerings nor unworthy of offerings. He is not an object, and cannot be contacted. He is not a whole, nor a conglomeration. He surpasses all calculations. He is utterly unequalled, yet equal to the ultimate reality of things. He is matchless, especially in effort. He surpasses all measure. He does not go, does not stay, does not pass beyond. He is neither seen, heard, distinguished, nor known. He is without any complexity, having attained the equanimity of omniscient gnosis. Equal toward all things, he does not discriminate between them. He is without reproach, without excess, without corruption, without conception, and without intellectualization. He is without activity, without birth, without occurrence, without origin, without production, and without nonproduction. He is without fear and without subconsciousness; without sorrow, without joy, and without strain. No verbal teaching can express him.

“Such is the body of the Tathāgata and thus should he be seen. Who sees thus, truly sees. Who sees otherwise, sees falsely.”

The venerable Śāriputra then asked the Buddha, “Lord, in which buddhafield did the noble Vimalakīrti die, before reincarnating in this buddhafield?”

The Buddha said, “Śāriputra, ask this good man directly where he died to reincarnate here.”

Then the venerable Śāriputra asked the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, “Noble sir, where did you die to reincarnate here?”

Vimalakīrti declared, “Is there anything among the things that you see, elder, that dies or is reborn?”

*Śāriputra:* There is nothing that dies or is reborn.

*Vimalakīrti:* Likewise, reverend Śāriputra, as all things neither die nor are reborn, why do you ask, “Where did you die to reincarnate here?” Reverend Śāriputra, if one were to ask a man or woman created by a magician where he or she had died to reincarnate there, what do you think he or she would answer?

*Śāriputra:* Noble sir, a magical creation does not die, nor is it reborn.

*Vimalakīrti:* Reverend Śāriputra, did not the Tathāgata declare that all things have the nature of a magical creation?

*Śāriputra:* Yes, noble sir, that is indeed so.

*Vimalakīrti:* Reverend Śāriputra, since all things have the nature of a magical creation, why do you ask, “Where have you died to reincarnate here?” Reverend Śāriputra, “death” is an end of performance, and “rebirth” is the continuation of performance. But, although a bodhisattva dies, he does not put an end to the performance of the roots of virtue, and although he is reborn, he does not adhere to the continuation of sin.”

Then, the Buddha said to the venerable Śāriputra, “Śāriputra, this holy person came here from the presence of the Tathāgata Akṣobhya in the universe Abhirati.”

*Śāriputra:* Lord, it is wonderful that this holy person, having left a buddhafiield as pure as Abhirati, should enjoy a buddhafiield as full of defects as this Sahā universe!

The Licchavi Vimalakīrti said, “Śāriputra, what do you think? Does the light of the sun accompany the darkness?”

*Śāriputra:* Certainly not, noble sir!

*Vimalakīrti:* Then the two do not go together?

*Śāriputra:* Noble sir, those two do not go together. As soon as the sun rises, all darkness is destroyed.

*Vimalakīrti:* Then why does the sun rise over the world?

*Śāriputra:* It rises to illuminate the world, and to eliminate the darkness.

*Vimalakīrti:* Just in the same way, reverend Śāriputra, the bodhisattva reincarnates voluntarily in the impure buddhafiields in order to purify the living beings, in order to make the light of wisdom shine, and in order to clear away the darkness. Since they do not associate with the afflictions, they dispel the darkness of the afflictions of all living beings.

Thereupon, the entire multitude experienced the desire to behold the universe Abhirati, the Tathāgata Akṣobhya, his bodhisattvas, and his great disciples. The Buddha, knowing the thoughts of the entire multitude, said to the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, “Noble son, this multitude wishes to behold the universe Abhirati and the Tathāgata Akṣobhya—show them!”

Then the Licchavi Vimalakīrti thought, “Without rising from my couch, I shall pick up in my right hand the universe Abhirati and all it contains: its hundreds of thousands of bodhisattvas; its abodes of devas, nāgas, yakṣas,

gandharvas, and asuras, bounded by its Cakravāḍa mountains; its rivers, lakes, fountains, streams, oceans, and other bodies of water; its Mount Sumeru and other hills and mountain ranges; its moon, its sun, and its stars; its devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, and asuras themselves; its Brahmā and his retinues; its villages, cities, towns, provinces, kingdoms, men, women, and houses; its bodhisattvas; its disciples; the tree of enlightenment of the Tathāgata Akṣobhya; and the Tathāgata Akṣobhya himself, seated in the middle of an assembly vast as an ocean, teaching the Dharma. Also the lotuses that accomplish the buddha-work among the living beings; the three jeweled ladders that rise from its earth to its Trāyastriṃśa heaven, on which ladders the gods of that heaven descend to the world to see, honor, and serve the Tathāgata Akṣobhya and to hear the Dharma, and on which the men of the earth climb to the Trāyastriṃśa heaven to visit those gods. Like a potter with his wheel, I will reduce that universe Abhirati, with its store of innumerable virtues, from its watery base up to its Akaniṣṭha heaven, to a minute size and, carrying it gently like a garland of flowers, will bring it to this Sahā universe and will show it to the multitudes.”

Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti entered into a concentration, and performed a miraculous feat such that he reduced the universe Abhirati to a minute size, and took it with his right hand, and brought it into this Sahā universe.

In that universe Abhirati, the disciples, bodhisattvas, and those among gods and men who possessed the superknowledge of the divine eye all cried out, “Lord, we are being carried away! Sugata, we are being carried off! Protect us, O Tathāgata!”

But, to discipline them, the Tathāgata Akṣobhya said to them, “You are being carried off by the bodhisattva Vimalakīrti. It is not my affair.”

As for the other men and gods, they had no awareness at all that they were being carried anywhere.

Although the universe Abhirati had been brought into the universe Sahā, the Sahā universe was not increased or diminished; it was neither compressed nor obstructed. Nor was the universe Abhirati reduced internally, and both universes appeared to be the same as they had ever been.

Thereupon, the Buddha Śākyamuni asked all the multitudes, “Friends, behold the splendors of the universe Abhirati, the Tathāgata Akṣobhya, the array of his buddhafield, and the splendors of these disciples and bodhisattvas!”

They replied, “We see them, Lord!”

The Buddha said, “Those bodhisattvas who wish to embrace such a buddhafield should educate themselves in all the bodhisattva-practices of the Tathāgata Akṣobhya.”

While Vimalakīrti, with his miraculous power, showed them thus the universe Abhirati and the Tathāgata Akṣobhya, one hundred and forty thousand living beings among the men and gods of the Sahā universe conceived the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment, and all of them formed a prayer to be reborn in the universe Abhirati. And the Buddha prophesied that in the future all would be reborn in the universe Abhirati. And the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, having thus developed all the living beings who could thereby be developed, returned the universe Abhirati exactly to its former place.

The Lord then said to the venerable Śāriputra, “Śāriputra, did you see that universe Abhirati, and the Tathāgata Akṣobhya?”

Śāriputra replied, “I saw it, Lord! May all living beings come to live in a buddhafield as splendid as that! May all living beings come to have miraculous powers just like those of the noble Licchavi Vimalakīrti!

“We have gained great benefit from having seen a holy man such as he. We have gained a great benefit from having heard such teaching of the Dharma, whether the Tathāgata himself still actually exists or whether he has already attained ultimate liberation. Hence, there is no need to mention the great benefit for those who, having heard it, believe it, rely on it, embrace it, remember it, read it, and penetrate to its depth; and, having found faith in it, teach, recite, and show it to others and apply themselves to the yoga of meditation upon its teaching.

“Those living beings who understand correctly this teaching of the Dharma will obtain the treasury of the jewels of the Dharma.

“Those who study correctly this teaching of the Dharma will become the companions of the Tathāgata. Those who honor and serve the adepts of this doctrine will be the true protectors of the Dharma. Those who write, teach, and worship this teaching of the Dharma will be visited by the Tathāgata in their homes. Those who take pleasure in this teaching of the Dharma will embrace all merits. Those who teach it to others, whether it be no more than a single stanza of four lines, or a single summary phrase from this teaching of the Dharma, will be performing the great Dharma-sacrifice. And those

who devote to this teaching of the Dharma their tolerance, their zeal, their intelligence, their discernment, their vision, and their aspirations, thereby become subject to the prophesy of future Buddhahood!”

## Antecedents and Transmission of the Holy Dharma

Then Śakra, the king of the gods, said to the Buddha, “Lord, formerly I have heard from the Tathāgata and from Mañjuśrī, the crown prince of wisdom, many hundreds of thousands of teachings of the Dharma, but I have never before heard a teaching of the Dharma as remarkable as this instruction in the entrance into the method of inconceivable transformations. Lord, those living beings who, having heard this teaching of the Dharma, accept it, remember it, read it, and understand it deeply will be, without a doubt, true vessels of the Dharma; there is no need to mention those who apply themselves to the yoga of meditation upon it. They will cut off all possibility of unhappy lives, will open their way to all fortunate lives, will always be looked after by all buddhas, will always overcome all adversaries, and will always conquer all devils. They will practice the path of the bodhisattvas, will take their places upon the seat of enlightenment, and will have truly entered the domain of the tathāgatas. Lord, the noble sons and daughters who will teach and practice this exposition of the Dharma will be honored and served by me and my followers. To the villages, towns, cities, states, kingdoms, and capitals wherein this teaching of the Dharma will be applied, taught, and demonstrated, I and my followers will come to hear the Dharma. I will inspire the unbelieving with faith, and I will guarantee my help and protection to those who believe and uphold the Dharma.”

At these words, the Buddha said to Śakra, the king of the gods, “Excellent! Excellent, king of gods! The Tathāgata rejoices in your good words. King of gods, the enlightenment of the buddhas of the past, present, and future is expressed in this discourse of Dharma. Therefore, king of gods, when noble sons and daughters accept it, repeat it, understand it deeply, write it completely, and, making it into a book, honor it, those sons and daughters thereby pay homage to the buddhas of the past, present, and future.

“Let us suppose, king of gods, that this billion-world-galactic universe were as full of tathāgatas as it is covered with groves of sugarcane, with rosebushes, with bamboo thickets, with sesame gardens, and with flowers, and that a noble son or daughter were to honor them, revere them, respect and adore them, offering them all sorts of comforts and offerings for an

eon or more than an eon. And let us suppose that, these tathāgatas having entered ultimate liberation, he or she honored each of them by enshrining their preserved bodies in a memorial stūpa made of precious stones, each as large as a world with four great continents, rising as high as the world of Brahmā, adorned with parasols, banners, standards, and lamps. And let us suppose finally that, having erected all these stūpas for the tathāgatas, he or she were to devote an eon or more to offering them flowers, perfumes, banners, and standards, while playing drums and music. That being done, what do you think, king of gods? Would that noble son or daughter receive much merit as a consequence of such activities?”

Śakra, the king of the gods, replied, “Many merits, Lord! Many merits, O Sugata! Were one to spend hundreds of thousands of millions of eons, it would be impossible to measure the limit of the mass of merits that that noble son or daughter would thereby gather!”

The Buddha said, “Have faith, king of gods, and understand this: whoever accepts this exposition of the Dharma called *Instruction in the Inconceivable Liberation*, recites it, and understands it deeply, he or she will gather merits even greater than those who perform the above acts. Why so? Because, king of gods, the enlightenment of the Buddhas arises from the Dharma, and one honors them by the Dharma worship, and not by material worship. Thus it is taught, king of gods, and thus you must understand it.”

The Buddha then further said to Śakra, the king of the gods, “Once, king of gods, long ago, long before eons more numerous than the innumerable, immense, immeasurable, inconceivable, and even before then, the Tathāgata called Bhaiṣajyarāja appeared in the world: an arhat, perfectly and fully enlightened, endowed with knowledge and conduct, a blissful one, knower of the world, incomparable knower of men who need to be civilized, teacher of gods and men, a lord, a buddha. He appeared in the eon called Vicaraṇa in the universe called Mahāvūha.

“The length of life of this perfectly and fully enlightened Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyarāja was twenty short eons. His retinue of disciples numbered thirty-six million billion, and his retinue of bodhisattvas numbered twelve million billion. In that same era, king of gods, there was a universal monarch called King Ratnacchattra, who reigned over the four continents and possessed seven precious jewels. He had one thousand heroic sons, powerful, strong, and able to conquer enemy armies. This King Ratnacchattra honored the Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyarāja and his retinue with many excellent offerings during

five short eons. At the end of this time, the King Ratnacchattra said to his sons, ‘Recognizing that during my reign I have worshiped the Tathāgata, in your turn you also should worship him.

“The thousand princes gave their consent, obeying their father the king, and all together, during another five short eons, they honored the Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyarāja with all sorts of excellent offerings.

“Among them, there was a prince by the name of Candracchattra, who retired into solitude and thought to himself, ‘Is there not another mode of worship, even better and more noble than this?’

“Then, by the supernatural power of the Buddha Bhaiṣajyarāja, the gods spoke to him from the heavens: ‘Good man, the supreme worship is Dharma-worship.’

“Candracchattra asked them, ‘What is this “Dharma-worship”?’

“The gods replied, ‘Good man, go to the Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyarāja, ask him about “Dharma-worship,” and he will explain it to you fully.’

“Then, the prince Candracchattra went to the Lord Bhaiṣajyarāja, the arhat, the Tathāgata, the unexcelled, perfectly enlightened one, and having approached him, bowed down at his feet, circumambulated him to the right three times, and withdrew to one side. He then asked, ‘Lord, I have heard of a “Dharma-worship,” which surpasses all other worship. What is this “Dharma-worship”?’

“The Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyarāja said, ‘Noble son, Dharma-worship is that worship rendered to the discourses taught by the Tathāgata. These discourses are deep and profound in illumination. They do not conform to the mundane and are difficult to understand and difficult to see and difficult to realize. They are subtle, precise, and ultimately incomprehensible. As sūtras, they are collected in the canon of the bodhisattvas, stamped with the insignia of the king of incantations and teachings. They reveal the irreversible wheel of Dharma, arising from the six transcendences, cleansed of any false notions. They are endowed with all the aids to enlightenment and embody the seven factors of enlightenment. They introduce living beings to the great compassion and teach them the great love. They eliminate all the convictions of the Māras, and they manifest relativity.

““They contain the message of selflessness, living-beinglessness, lifelessness, personlessness, voidness, signlessness, wishlessness, nonperformance, nonproduction, and nonoccurrence.

““They make possible the attainment of the seat of enlightenment and

set in motion the wheel of the Dharma. They are approved and praised by the chiefs of the gods, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, and mahoragas. They preserve unbroken the heritage of the holy Dharma, contain the treasury of the Dharma, and represent the summit of the Dharma-worship. They are upheld by all holy beings and teach all the bodhisattva practices. They induce the unmistakable understanding of the Dharma in its ultimate sense. They bring emancipation through teaching the epitomes of the Dharma, the impermanence, misery, selflessness, and peace of all things. They cause the abandonment of avarice, immorality, malice, laziness, forgetfulness, foolishness, and jealousy, as well as bad convictions, adherence to objects, and all opposition. They are praised by all the buddhas. They are the medicines for the tendencies of mundane life, and they authentically manifest the great happiness of liberation. To teach correctly, to uphold, to investigate, and to understand such sūtras, thus incorporating into one's own life the holy Dharma—that is the “Dharma-worship.”

“Furthermore, noble son, the Dharma-worship consists of determining the Dharma according to the Dharma; applying the Dharma according to the Dharma; being in harmony with relativity; being free of extremist convictions; attaining the tolerance of ultimate birthlessness and nonoccurrence of all things; realizing selflessness and living-beinglessness; refraining from struggle about causes and conditions, without quarreling, or disputing; not being possessive; being free of egoism; relying on the meaning and not on the literal expression; relying on gnosis and not on consciousness; relying on the ultimate teachings definitive in meaning and not insisting on the superficial teachings interpretable in meaning; relying on reality and not insisting on opinions derived from personal authorities; realizing correctly the reality of the Buddha; realizing the ultimate absence of any fundamental consciousness; and overcoming the habit of clinging to an ultimate ground. Finally, attaining peace by stopping everything from ignorance to old age, death, sorrow, lamentation, misery, anxiety, and trouble, and realizing that living beings know no end to their views concerning these twelve links of dependent origination; then, noble son, when you do not hold to any view at all, it is called unexcelled Dharma-worship.’

“King of gods, when the prince Candracchatra had heard this definition of Dharma-worship from the Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyarāja, he attained the conformatory tolerance of ultimate birthlessness; and, taking his robes and ornaments, he offered them to the Buddha Bhaiṣajyarāja, saying, ‘When the

Tathāgata will be in ultimate liberation, I wish to defend his holy Dharma, to protect it, and to worship it. May the Tathāgata grant me his supernatural blessing, that I may be able to conquer Māra and all adversaries and to incorporate in all my lives the holy Dharma of the Buddha!

“The Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyarāja, knowing the high resolve of Candracchatra, prophesied to him that he would be, at a later time, in the future, the protector, guardian, and defender of the city of the holy Dharma. Then, king of gods, the prince Candracchatra, out of his great faith in the Tathāgata, left the household life in order to enter the homeless life of a monk and, having done so, lived making great efforts toward the attainment of virtue. Having made great effort and being well established in virtue, he soon produced the five superknowledges, understood the incantations, and obtained the invincible eloquence. When the Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyarāja attained ultimate liberation, Candracchatra, on the strength of his superknowledges and by the power of his incantations, made the wheel of the Dharma turn just as the Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyarāja had done and continued to do so for ten short eons.

“King of gods, while the monk Candracchatra was exerting himself thus to protect the holy Dharma, thousands of millions of living beings reached the stage of irreversibility on the path to unexcelled, perfect enlightenment, fourteen billion living beings were disciplined in the vehicles of the disciples and solitary sages, and innumerable living beings took rebirth in the human and heavenly realms.

“Perhaps, king of gods, you are wondering or experiencing some doubt about whether or not, at that former time, the King Ratnacchatra was not some other than the actual Tathāgata Ratnārcis. You must not imagine that, for the present Tathāgata Ratnārcis was at that time, in that epoch, the universal monarch Ratnacchatra. As for the thousand sons of the King Ratnacchatra, they are now the thousand bodhisattvas of the present blessed eon, during the course of which they are to become all of the one thousand buddhas to appear in the world. Four of them, Krakucchanda and the others, have already appeared and the rest are still to be born. They start from Krakucchanda and end with the Tathāgata Roca, who will be the last to be born.

“Perhaps, king of gods, you are asking yourself if, in that life, in that time, the Prince Candracchatra who upheld the Holy Dharma of Lord Tathāgata Bhaiṣajyarāja was not someone other than myself. But you must not imagine that, for I was, in that life, in that time, the Prince Candracchatra. Thus,

it is necessary to know, king of gods, that among all the worships rendered to the Tathāgata, Dharma-worship is the very best. Yes, it is good, eminent, excellent, perfect, supreme, and unexcelled. And therefore, king of gods, do not worship me with material objects but worship me with Dharma-worship! Do not honor me with material objects but honor me by honor to the Dharma!”

Then the Lord Śākyamuni said to the bodhisattva Maitreya, the great spiritual hero, “I transmit to you, Maitreya, this unexcelled, perfect enlightenment which I attained only after innumerable millions of billions of eons, in order that, at a later time, during a later life, a similar teaching of the Dharma, protected by your supernatural power, will spread in the world and will not disappear. Why? Maitreya, in the future there will be noble sons and daughters, devas, nāgas, yakṣas, gandharvas, and asuras, who, having planted the roots of virtue, will conceive the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. If they do not hear this teaching of the Dharma, they will certainly lose boundless advantages and even perish. But if they hear such a teaching, they will rejoice, will believe, and will accept it upon the crowns of their heads. Hence, in order to protect those future noble sons and daughters, you must spread a teaching such as this!

“Maitreya, there are two gestures of the bodhisattvas. What are they? The first gesture is to believe in all sorts of phrases and words, and the second gesture is to penetrate exactly the profound principle of the Dharma without being afraid. Such are the two gestures of the bodhisattvas. Maitreya, it must be known that the bodhisattvas who believe in all sorts of words and phrases, and apply themselves accordingly, are beginners and not experienced in religious practice. But the bodhisattvas who read, hear, believe, and teach this profound teaching with its impeccable expressions reconciling dichotomies and its analyses of stages of development—these are veterans in the religious practice.

“Maitreya, there are two reasons the beginner bodhisattvas hurt themselves and do not concentrate on the profound Dharma. What are they? Hearing this profound teaching never before heard, they are terrified and doubtful, do not rejoice, and reject it, thinking, ‘Whence comes this teaching never before heard?’ They then behold other noble sons accepting, becoming vessels for, and teaching this profound teaching, and they do not attend upon them, do not befriend them, do not respect them, and do not honor

them, and eventually they go so far as to criticize them. These are the two reasons the beginner bodhisattvas hurt themselves and do not penetrate the profound Dharma.

“There are two reasons the bodhisattvas who do aspire to the profound Dharma hurt themselves and do not attain the tolerance of the ultimate birthlessness of things. What are these two? These bodhisattvas despise and reproach the beginner bodhisattvas, who have not been practicing for a long time, and they do not initiate them or instruct them in the profound teaching. Having no great respect for this profound teaching, they are not careful about its rules. They help living beings by means of material gifts and do not help them by means of the gift of the Dharma. Such, Maitreya, are the two reasons the bodhisattvas who aspire to the profound Dharma hurt themselves and will not quickly attain the tolerance of the ultimate birthlessness of all things.”

Having been thus taught, the bodhisattva Maitreya said to the Buddha, “Lord, the beautiful teachings of the Tathāgata are wonderful and truly excellent. Lord, from this time forth, I will avoid all such errors and will defend and uphold this attainment of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment by the Tathāgata during innumerable hundreds of thousands of millions of billions of eons! In the future, I will place in the hands of noble sons and noble daughters who are worthy vessels of the holy Dharma this profound teaching. I will instill in them the power of memory with which they may, having believed in this teaching, retain it, recite it, penetrate its depths, teach it, propagate it, write it down, and proclaim it extensively to others.

“Thus I will instruct them, Lord, and thus it may be known that in that future time those who believe in this teaching and who enter deeply into it will be sustained by the supernatural blessing of the bodhisattva Maitreya.”

Thereupon the Buddha gave his approval to the bodhisattva Maitreya: “Excellent! Excellent! Your word is well given! The Tathāgata rejoices and commends your good promise.”

Then all the bodhisattvas said together in one voice, “Lord, we also, after the ultimate liberation of the Tathāgata, will come from our various buddhafi elds to spread far and wide this enlightenment of the perfect Buddha, the Tathāgata. May all noble sons and daughters believe in that!”

Then the four Mahārājas, the great kings of the quarters, said to the Buddha, “Lord, in all the towns, villages, cities, kingdoms, and palaces, wherever this discourse of the Dharma will be practised, upheld, and

correctly taught, we, the four great kings, will go there with our armies, our young warriors, and our retinues, to hear the Dharma. And we will protect the teachers of this Dharma for a radius of one league so that no one who plots injury or disruption against these teachers will have any opportunity to do them harm.”

Then the Buddha said to the venerable Ānanda, “Receive then, Ānanda, this expression of the teaching of the Dharma. Remember it, and teach it widely and correctly to others!”

Ānanda replied, “I have memorized, Lord, this expression of the teaching of the Dharma. But what is the name of this teaching, and how should I remember it?”

The Buddha said, “Ānanda, this exposition of the Dharma is called *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, or *The Reconciliation of Dichotomies*, or even *Section of the Inconceivable Liberation*. Remember it thus!”

Thus spoke the Buddha. And the Licchavi Vimalakīrti, the crown prince Mañjuśrī, the venerable Ānanda, the bodhisattvas, the great disciples, the entire multitude, and the whole universe with its gods, men, asuras and gandharvas, rejoiced exceedingly. All heartily praised these declarations by the Lord.

*This completes the Noble Mahāyāna Sūtra “The Teaching of Vimalakīrti.” It has 1,800 ślokas in six fascicles, and was translated, edited and established by the monk Chönyi Tsultrim.*

Note: A full edition of this translation, with an introduction, footnotes, glossary, and a bibliography, can be seen in the 84000 Reading Room: <http://read.84000.co/#UT22084-060-005/title> .

DZONGSAR KHYENTSE RINPOCHE, also known as Khyentse Norbu, is a Buddhist teacher, scholar, author, and film director. Born in Bhutan in 1961, Rinpoche trained from a very young age to become a scholar of the Tibetan Rimé movement, following the heritage of Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo. In addition to supervising several monasteries and Buddhist centers around the world, he has authored many books, including *What Makes You Not a Buddhist*, *Not for Happiness* and *The Guru Drinks Bourbon?* Rinpoche has also directed several award-winning feature films, including *The Cup*, *Travellers & Magicians* and *Hema Hema*. His charitable organizations include Siddhartha's Intent, Khyentse Foundation, Lotus Outreach, and 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha.

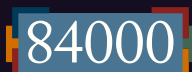
ROBERT A.F. THURMAN is the Jey Tsong Khapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies in the Department of Religion at Columbia University, President of the Tibet House U.S., a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Tibetan civilization, and President of the American Institute of Buddhist Studies, a non-profit affiliated with the Center for Buddhist Studies at Columbia University and dedicated to the publication of translations of important artistic and scientific treatises from the Tibetan Tengyur.

#### 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha

It is said that the Buddha taught more than 84,000 methods to attain true peace and freedom from suffering. Of these teachings, only 5% have been translated into modern languages. Due to the rapid decline in knowledge of classical languages and in the number of qualified scholars, we are in danger of losing this cultural heritage and spiritual legacy. 84000 aims to translate all of the Buddha's words into modern languages, and to make them available to everyone.

Visit [www.84000.co](http://www.84000.co) today to read the words of the Buddha.





TRANSLATING THE WORDS OF THE BUDDHA

[WWW.84000.CO](http://WWW.84000.CO)