

## Stage 10: The Cloud of Dharma Stage (Dharmameghā Bhūmī)

A bodhisattva proceeding on the tenth stage, Subhūti, should just be called a Tathāgata.

Source: Translated from *Pañcaviṃśāśāsrīkā prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, ed.

Etienne Lamotte, in *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse* (Louvain: Institut Orientaliste, 1949-80), pp. 2381-2444.<sup>69</sup>

### 4.4.5 The Skillful Means of Vimalakīrti

Finally, one more aspect of the bodhisattva path needs to be emphasized here: the bodhisattvas' use of skillful means (upāya) in expressing their compassion for others. We have already seen an example of the Buddha's use of upāya in the parable of the burning house (see 4.1). Like the Buddha, bodhisattvas did not always act in predictable or straitlaced fashion in creatively teaching others the path. Indeed, when the bodhisattva's upāya is coupled with the freedom that comes from their liberating vision of the Perfection of Wisdom, the result could sometimes be rather eccentric behavior, prototypical, perhaps, of Zen masters or Tibetan gurus.

One bodhisattva who was famous in this regard was Vimalakīrti, whose story is told in a sūtra bearing his name. In a series of encounters, Vimalakīrti, with his Perfection of Wisdom perspective, manages to unsettle various disciples of the Buddha (śrāvakas), as well as a number of his fellow bodhisattvas, while leading them along the path to true enlightenment. In addition, Vimalakīrti is not even a monk but a householder, a layperson, something that added to his popularity in certain Chinese Buddhist circles, where this sūtra became famous.

### The Skillful Means of Vimalakīrti

And in the city there lived an elder named Vimalakīrti, who dwelt there as a skillful means for the salvation of human beings. For he used his measureless wealth to convert the poor, and his own pure virtue to convert those who broke the precepts; he controlled himself with patience to convert the scornful, and strove with diligence to convert the lazy; he used his calm meditation to convert the confused, and his firm wisdom to convert the ignorant.

He wore the white robes of a layman but observed the pure conduct of a recluse; he lived the household life but was not attached to the world. He had a wife and children but ever practiced the religious life: he kept a household but ever delighted in solitude.

He wore jewels and ornaments but adorned his body with the signs of greatness; he ate and drank but delighted in the taste of meditation. He

<sup>69</sup> Alternative English translation, Edward Conze, *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 163-78.

went to the gambling hall but worked for the salvation of men; he took on the ways of the heretics but never strayed from the true faith; he knew all the worldly texts but ever delighted in the teachings of the Buddha.

And truly he was honored by all as the best among the worthy, for he upheld justice; he converted the old and the young.

He knew all businesses, but he took no pleasure in the worldly profits he gained. Rather he went out upon the streets to benefit all living creatures: he entered the courts to defend the oppressed; he attended the debates to lead the people to righteousness; he went to the schools to educate the untaught; he entered the brothels to show the follies of lust; he went to the wine houses to make firm the wills of men.

When he was with the elders, he was the most honored among them and taught them the highest teachings; when he was with the householders, he was the most honored among them and taught them to cast aside attachment; when he was with the warriors, he was the most honored among them and taught them forbearance.

When he was with the priests, he was the most honored among them and taught them humility; when he was with the judges, he was the most honored among them and taught them justice; when he was with the princes, he was the most honored among them and taught them loyalty.

When he was in the inner palace, he was the most honored person there, and he converted all the harem girls to virtue; when he was with the common people, he was the most honored among them and taught them the power of merit. . . .

### The Illness of Vimalakīrti

And thus with innumerable skillful means, the elder Vimalakīrti brought benefit to living creatures, and using his skillful means he made his body appear to be sick.

And the kings and ministers, the elders and householders, the priests and princes heard of his illness, and thousands upon thousands of people came to inquire after his health. And Vimalakīrti made use of his illness to receive them and to preach to them the Law.

### True Meditation

And the elder Vimalakīrti thought to himself: "Here I am sick and upon my bed, yet the Blessed One has no compassion upon me, nor does he think of me."

But the Blessed One knew his thoughts.

So the Buddha said to Śāriputra: "Go and call on Vimalakīrti, and inquire about his illness."

And Śāriputra said to the Buddha: "Blessed One, I am not worthy to call on him and inquire about his illness. For I remember that once I was sitting quietly in meditation at the foot of a tree, and Vimalakīrti came up to me and said:

'Śāriputra, to sit quietly is not necessarily to sit in meditation. But rather to sit in meditation is to let neither your body nor your mind appear in the universe; it is to let all your activities appear without arising from your trance of cessation.'

'To sit in meditation is to act like everyone else while casting aside no quality of enlightenment; it is to let your mind neither abide within or wander without.'

'To sit in meditation is to be unmoved by error while you practice all that conduces to enlightenment; it is to enter nirvāṇa without cutting off the passions of the world.'

'It is when you can sit like this that you win the seal of the Buddhas.'

"And when I heard this, Blessed One, I remained silent and could make no reply. That is why I am not worthy to call on him and inquire about his illness. . . ."

### True Nirvāṇa

Then the Buddha said to the great Kātyāyana: "Go and call on Vimalakīrti and inquire about his illness."

And the great Kātyāyana said to the Buddha: "Blessed One, I am not worthy to call on him and inquire about his illness. For I remember that once the Buddha had preached an outline of the Law to a group of monks, and I was expanding upon it, teaching them the meaning of impermanence, and suffering, and emptiness, and not-Self, and nirvāṇa; and Vimalakīrti came up to me and said:

'Kātyāyana, do not use arising and ceasing thoughts to teach about reality. For all events ultimately neither arise nor cease: that is the meaning of impermanence. And the five aggregates are empty and occur nowhere: that is the meaning of suffering.'

'No event ever really happens: that is the meaning of emptiness. Self and not-Self are the same: that is the meaning of not-Self. And events have never been as they are, and so will never cease: that is the meaning of nirvāṇa.'

"And when he taught this teaching, the minds of all the monks gained freedom. That is why I am not worthy to call on him and inquire about his illness."

### True Purity

Then the Buddha said to Upālī: "Go and call on Vimalakīrti, and inquire about his illness."

And Upālī said to the Buddha: "Blessed One, I am not worthy to call on him and inquire about his illness. For I remember that once two monks had committed an offense, and they were so ashamed that they dared not tell the Buddha."

"And they confessed to me, and said: 'Resolve our doubt and our remorse, that we may cleanse our guilt.' So I was teaching them in accordance with the Law and Vimalakīrti came up to me and said:

'Upālī, do not aggravate the sin of these two monks, but rather wipe it out at once, without tormenting their minds. For the true nature of their sin abides neither within nor without, nor does it abide in between.'

"The Buddha has said that living creatures are impure when their minds are impure, and pure when their minds are pure. And the mind abides neither within nor without, nor does it abide in between: as their minds are,

so are their sins. Every event is the same, and does not depart from reality. Upālī, tell me, is your mind impure when it gains its freedom?"

"I said that it was not."

'And even so the minds of all living creatures are without impurity. Misconceptions are impurity; purity is to be without misconceptions. Error is impurity; purity is to be without error. Clinging to a self is impurity; purity is to be without clinging.'

'All events arise and cease, and do not abide: like an illusion, like lightning, events do not wait for each other, and do not stay for an instant. All events are false vision: like a dream, like fire, like the moon in water, like an image in a mirror, they are born of false vision.'

'He who knows this is said to be a keeper of the rule; he who knows this is said to be truly free.'

"And the two monks said: 'This is the highest wisdom, and it is beyond the ability of Upālī: he is the highest in keeping the rule, yet he cannot explain it. . . ."

"And the two monks had their doubt and remorse resolved, and awakened the thought of supreme and perfect enlightenment. That is why I am not worthy to call on him and inquire about his illness. . . ."

### True Enlightenment

Then the Buddha said to the bodhisattva Maitreya: "Go and call on Vimalakīrti, and inquire about his illness."

And Maitreya said to the Buddha: "Blessed One, I am not worthy to call on him and inquire about his illness. For I remember that once I was preaching to the King of the Gods and his retinue, explaining the conduct of one who can no longer be turned back from enlightenment, and Vimalakīrti came up to me and said:

'Maitreya, the Blessed One has prophesied that in one more life you will attain to supreme and perfect enlightenment. Tell me, for which life did you receive this prophecy? Is it the past, or the future, or the present?'

'For if it is the past, then your past life is already finished; if it is the future, then your future life has not yet come; if it is the present, then your present life does not abide. For the Buddha has said that at this very moment you are born, and are decaying and passing away.'

'And if you received the prophecy for no lifetime at all, then no lifetime at all is the fixed abode of nirvāṇa; and in nirvāṇa there is no receiving of prophecy, and no attaining to supreme and perfect enlightenment.'

'Maitreya, tell me, how did you receive the prophecy that in one more life you would attain to enlightenment? Did you receive the prophecy from the birth of reality? Did you receive the prophecy from the cessation of reality?'

'If you received the prophecy from the birth of reality, then reality has no birth; if you received the prophecy from the cessation of reality, then reality has no cessation.'

'All living creatures are reality; all events are reality; all the saints and sages are reality; even Maitreya is reality.'

'If Maitreya receives a prophecy, then all living creatures should receive a prophecy, for reality is always the same and never different.'

If Maitreya attains to supreme and perfect enlightenment, then all living creatures should attain to it, for all living creatures are the manifestation of enlightenment.

If Maitreya gains nirvāṇa, then all living creatures should gain nirvāṇa; for the Buddhas know that all living creatures are already calm and ceased, and this is nirvāṇa; and they shall not cease hereafter.

Therefore do not mislead these sons of heaven with your teachings; for there is no such thing as awakening the thought of enlightenment, and there is no such thing as turning back from it.

But rather you should urge these sons of heaven to give up thinking that enlightenment is something real, or something different; for enlightenment cannot be attained by the body, and it cannot be attained by the mind.

Enlightenment is calm cessation, for there all manifestations cease. Enlightenment is nonseeing, for it is beyond all connection. Enlightenment is nonaction, for it is without thought. Enlightenment is cutting off, for it sees nothing as real. Enlightenment is separation, for it imposes nothing upon reality.

Blessed One, when Vimalakīrti taught this teaching, two hundred sons of heaven realized that no event in this world is truly real. That is why I am not worthy to call on him and inquire about his illness.

### The Visit of Mañjuśrī

Then the Buddha said to the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī: "Go and call on Vimalakīrti, and inquire about his illness."

And Mañjuśrī said to the Buddha: "Blessed One, this excellent man is hard to answer. Deeply he has reached reality; skillfully he teaches the essentials of the Law. His eloquence is unhindered and his insight boundless; he knows all that a bodhisattva must do, and has penetrated into all the secret treasures of the Buddha. He has overcome the Evil One, and exercises magic powers; he has gained both wisdom and skillful means. But I will accept the command of the Buddha, and go and inquire about his illness."

And all the bodhisattvas who were present—the great disciples and the kings of the four heavens—all thought to themselves: "Now these two great men shall meet together; surely they will discuss the wonderful Law."

So eight thousand bodhisattvas, and five hundred disciples, and hundreds of thousands of men and gods followed after Mañjuśrī to the house of Vimalakīrti.

### The Buddha Way

And Mañjuśrī asked Vimalakīrti: "How does a bodhisattva set forth on the Way of the Buddha?"

And Vimalakīrti replied: "If a bodhisattva treads what is not the Way, then he has set forth on the Way of the Buddha."

And Mañjuśrī asked: "How does a bodhisattva tread what is not the Way?"

And Vimalakīrti replied: "A bodhisattva walks among those who have committed the most grievous sins, yet feels no anger; he goes to the deepest hell, yet has neither sin nor stain."

"He may seem to be aged and sick, but he has cut off all disease, and has no fear of death; he may seem to be born with property, but he ever looks upon impermanence, and desires nothing. He may seem to have wives and concubines, but he is far from the swamp of desire; he may seem to be dull and stammering, but he is perfect in eloquence and un-failing in memory; he may seem to have entered the wrong crossing, but he saves all living creatures. He may seem to be in the world, but he has cut off the causes of becoming; and he may seem to be in nirvāṇa, but he has not cut off arising and ceasing."

"And if a bodhisattva thus can tread what is not the Way, then he has set forth on the Way of the Buddha."

And then Vimalakīrti asked Mañjuśrī: "What is the seed of Buddhahood?"

And Mañjuśrī replied: "The body is the seed of Buddhahood; ignorance and craving are the seeds of Buddhahood; lust and hatred and delusion are the seeds of Buddhahood... The senses are the seeds of Buddhahood; evil and passion are the seeds of Buddhahood... Whoever sees the unconditioned, and enters into the fixed abode of nirvāṇa, cannot awaken the thought of supreme and perfect enlightenment. For the lotus flower does not grow on the high dry plain, but in the muddy swamp; and only in the swamp of passion are there living creatures to produce the qualities of Buddhahood."

### Entering the Gate of Oneness

And Vimalakīrti said to all the bodhisattvas: "Gentlemen, tell me, how does a bodhisattva enter the gate of oneness? Each of you tell me in your own way."

So the bodhisattva Dharmavikurvaṇa said: "Gentlemen, arising and ceasing are two. But events have never arisen, so now they do not cease. To realize that no event in this world is truly real is to enter the gate of oneness."

The bodhisattva Candrotara said: "Darkness and light are two. If there is neither darkness nor light, then they are two no longer. For when you enter the trance of cessation there is neither darkness nor light; and so it is with all events. To enter into this state of peace is to enter the gate of oneness."

The bodhisattva Ratnamudrāṣṭa said: "To delight in nirvāṇa and despise the world are two. If you neither delight in nirvāṇa nor loathe the world, then they are two no longer. For if there were bondage there could be freedom; but if there has never been bondage, then who would seek for freedom? If there is neither bondage nor freedom, then there is neither delight nor loathing. This is to enter the gate of oneness."

The bodhisattva Maṅkūṭarāja said: "The right and the wrong are two. If you abide in the right, then you do not discriminate between the right and the wrong. To be free of these two is to enter the gate of oneness."

The bodhisattva Satyarata said: "Reality and unreality are two. But he who truly sees does not see reality; so how could he see unreality? For it is not what the eye can see; only the eye of wisdom can see it; and the eye of wisdom neither sees nor does not see. This is to enter the gate of oneness."

And thus each of the bodhisattvas spoke in turn; and they asked Mañjuśrī what it was to enter the gate of oneness.

Mañjuśrī said: "I think that when you can neither speak nor talk of any event, when you neither indicate nor know any thing, when you pass beyond both questions and answers, this is to enter the gate of oneness."

And then Mañjuśrī said to Vimalakīrti: "Sir, each of us has spoken. Tell us how a bodhisattva enters the gate of oneness."

And Vimalakīrti kept silent, and did not say a word. . . .

Source: Reprinted by permission of Wadsworth, Inc. from Stephan Beyer, *The Buddhist Experience* (Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1974), pp. 219-25 (slightly altered).<sup>70</sup>

<sup>70</sup>Original text, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtra* (Taishō shinhshū daizōkyō, ed. J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe [Tokyo, 1924-29] no. 475, 14:539a-551c).

## CHAPTER 5

### Saviors and Siddhas: The Mahāyāna Pantheon and Tantric Buddhism

The history of Mahāyāna thought is in part the history of great sūtras, in part the history of great philosophical thinkers who were influential in developing the doctrine, and in part the elaboration of the bodhisattva path. But it is also the history of an exuberance of mythological thinking, which sought to illustrate the practice of that path with the paradigms of great bodhisattvas and Buddhas, and it is the history of the development of alternative means to enlightenment. In the sections that follow, we shall look at some of these further evolutions in Mahāyāna thought by focusing, first, on the development of the Buddhism of devotion, which centered on certain savior figures of the growing Mahāyāna pantheon. We shall then examine some of the principles and practices of Tantric Buddhism, concentrating in particular on the visionary tradition of meditation.

#### 5.1 THE LIFE SPAN OF THE TATHĀGATA

One important area where Mahāyānists departed from earlier Nikāya Buddhist views lay in their understanding of the person of the Buddha Śākyamuni. Though still recognized as the "founder" of the tradition, Śākyamuni was, in the Mahāyāna, magnified and apotheosized in such a way that he was no longer thought of as a strictly historical figure (albeit an exceptional one). In particular, the view developed that his time as the Buddha was not limited to a mere eighty years on earth. Rather, as a transcendent Savior whose life is immeasurable, he was thought to exist eternally. The *locus classicus* for this new Mahāyāna vision of Śākyamuni was the *Lotus Sūtra*. The selection that follows, however, is taken from a later text, the *Sūtra of Golden Light*, which expresses the doctrine in a somewhat more straightforward manner in its account of the bodhisattva Ruciaketu's doubts about the life span of Śākyamuni.

Śākyamuni, however, was not the only Buddha in the Mahāyāna pantheon. With the unlimited extension of his life span, what had once been (in Nikāya Buddhism) a plurality of short-lived Buddhas existing in time and succeeding