

Seven Cases of Vimalakīrti

The Seventh Case: Silence

Entering the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality

I

Today, I would like to discuss the last of the seven cases selected from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. This case concerns the “Dharma Gate of Non-Duality,” expounded in the “Chapter on Entering the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality” (Chapter 9). This [concept] is central to the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*—so much so that merely mentioning the text immediately evokes the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality, as it constitutes the very core of the scripture.

The Dharma Gate of Non-Duality teaches that what is ordinarily regarded as “two” is, in fact, not two, but “one.” About thirty-three such pairs are discussed in this chapter. However, this principle is not limited to any fixed number such as thirty-three; from a contemporary standpoint, countless other dualities could also be included.

Upon reflection, we realize that there are indeed many instances in which two opposites are treated as a single pair. In some cases, the opposites seem mutually contradictory; in others, they are not necessarily in conflict but simply juxtaposed. There are countless such pairs in which two components are combined as one. From the standpoint of values, for example, we have good and evil, beauty and ugliness, truth and falsehood, right and wrong. From the standpoint of existence, we have origination and cessation, life and death, one and many, particular and universal, being and nothingness, and so forth. Indeed, the possibilities are limitless. The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* specifically discusses thirty-three such pairs.

Thus, what is normally regarded as two is, in truth, not two but one—or, more precisely, non-dual. This is what is called the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality. However,

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this non-duality is not something such that you merely start from the standpoint of “two” and assume or infer there must be a “one” underlying it, as if reasoning that a unity necessarily lies at the root of duality. Rather, one must directly, practically, and experientially enter into the very depth of “two”; only then can it be realized that “two,” just as they are, are “one.” Therefore, it is not that “one” exists somewhere beyond “two.”

When I say “beyond” here, I do not mean an external or internal transcendence, in the sense in which we ordinarily assert that such a “one” must necessarily exist. It does not exist, so to speak, in the mode of Sollen [(ought to be)]. Rather, “one” manifests itself when you truly transcend “two” and wholly becomes that “one” yourself. Thus, instead of standing on the side of “two” and assuming “one” as something necessary, you transcend “two” and leap into “one”—only then does “one” become present. Moreover, because “one” is now “here,” it follows that two is “over there”; this might seem to suggest that “two” exists apart from “one,” but that is not the case. On the contrary, at that point, “two” has already become non-dual.

II

The Dharma Gate of Non-Duality concerns the actual entry into the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality; it does not concern the mere assumption or conception of non-duality. When you enter that gate, the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality is what is original to you and what is immediately present. In other words, non-duality manifests itself—it is “awakened to” or realized. If, at that point, that to which one awakens and the one who awakens were two, then it would still be a matter of duality rather than non-duality. Therefore, unless awakening or realization is such that there no longer exists [the opposition between] the one who awakens and that to which one awakens, it cannot truly be called the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.

When I speak of awakening or realization, you might imagine that there is an “I” who realizes or awakens—that is, that there exists a Dharma Gate to which one awakens and an “I” who awakens to it. Yet that cannot be called the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality. In true awakening, the awakener and that to which one awakens—

the subject and the object, the knower and the known—become completely one. However, if anything remains apart from that oneness, then duality still persists. It follows that, in addition to the awakening that manifests, there remains something that is not awakening—so that “two” still remain. But true awakening has no inside or outside whatsoever; within it there is neither inside nor outside. Furthermore, there is nothing outside it, nor anything within it.

If we continue to think of something opposed to it as existing externally, then even when we speak of ultimate non-duality, we inevitably think of that ultimate non-duality and of that which is not nondual. Proceeding in this way through conceptual thinking will never arrive at true non-duality. When we inquire into what true non-duality is, precisely because we determine it as “true,” it inevitably stands opposed to what is “not true.” This is, so to speak, the very fate of discriminative thought. Proceeding in this way, the Dharma-Gate of Non-Duality can never [truly] manifest; it inevitably collapses back into two. For this very reason we now arrive at a [realm] that can in no way be expressed in words or reached by thought.

III

When we look at the scripture, we find that Vimalakīrti asks the bodhisattvas gathered at the assembly:

How does a bodhisattva enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality?

In response, each of the bodhisattvas expounds, in turn, [their own understanding of] what is meant by the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.

[Translator’s note: All scriptural quotations in this lecture are taken from Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*.]

For example, at the beginning it is written:

Among the assembly there was a bodhisattva named Dharmavikurvaṇa [Ch. Self-abiding in the Dharma], who said: “Virtuous Ones, arising and ceasing are [regarded as] two. Yet all beings are originally unborn, and therefore they never cease. Attaining insight into this unborn nature of all beings is to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.”

The Bodhisattva Śrīguṇḍha [Ch. Guardian of the Three Virtues] said: “‘I’ and ‘mine’ are [regarded as] two. Because there is an ‘I’, there is also ‘mine’. [But] since, [fundamentally,] there is no ‘I’, there is no ‘mine’ either. This is called entering the Dharma-Gate of Non-Duality.”

In this way, each bodhisattva, according to their own realization, explains what it means to enter the Dharma-Gate of Non-Duality. Since Vimalakīrti poses the question—“What is it to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality?”—to the bodhisattvas gathered at the assembly, each responds with their own explanation, beginning with the words: “Such-and-such a bodhisattva said ...”

The first to speak is Dharmavikurvaṇa Bodhisattva, who expresses the view that, ordinarily, arising and ceasing are [regarded as] two. We might also call this “life and death,” yet it is a [pair of] mutually opposed concepts. To say that [something] “arises” is to imply the opposite of “ceases”; to say that [something] “ceases” is to imply the opposite of “arises.” Ordinarily, these are seen as two, but [in truth] they are not two. Why are they not two? Because all beings are originally unborn (unarising); since they do not [truly] arise, they do not [truly] cease. In other words, all beings are unarising and unceasing—thus, arising and ceasing are not two but one. From the standpoint of this “one”, both arising and ceasing return to the “one”. Therefore, to regard them as two is mistaken; and when one realizes this truth, one attains insight into the unborn, unarising nature of all beings and thereby enters the Dharma-Gate of Non-Duality. This is how [the first bodhisattva] explains.

Next, Śrīguṇḍha Bodhisattva says: Ordinarily, we think that “I” and “mine” are two. Yet, all beings are without an “I,” without self, and therefore there is likewise no

“mine.” Thus, “I” and “mine” are not two but one—this is how he explains it.

Among these [teachings], I will highlight some that are especially thought-provoking to us. For example:

Puṣya Bodhisattva said: “Good and evil are [regarded as] two. If one neither gives rise to thoughts of good nor of evil, and realizes the realm where [all is] formless, one enters the Dharma-Gate of Non-Duality.”

What [this bodhisattva] means is this: Ordinarily, we must speak of good and evil as two. However, if we do not give rise to either good or evil [thoughts], then there are no forms or characteristics of good and evil. Thus, by realizing the realm where [all is] formless, we can enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.

Bodhisattva Siṃha [Ch. Lion] said: “Sin and merit are [regarded as] two. When one realizes that the nature of sin is not different from the nature of merit and, with adamantine wisdom, attains this [truth] without fail—being bound by nothing and seeking no liberation—this is to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.”

That is, sin and merit—one might also say virtue and fault, or guilt and innocence—are usually [regarded as] two. But if, with adamantine wisdom, we attain [the root-source] where such distinctions have not yet arisen—there, there is neither bondage nor liberation. Such is what it means to enter the Dharma-Gate of Non-Duality.

Then the sutra goes on to discuss such pairs as “mundane and supramundane,” “life-death and nirvāṇa,” “I and no-I,” “light [i.e., wisdom] and ignorance,” “form and the emptiness of form,” and so on—explaining how, in truth, each pair is not two but one.

Furthermore, it says: “Buddha, Dharma, and Community are [regarded as] two”—though they are in fact three. Here, Community refers to the Saṅgha. It is said that these three are, in truth, one. Indeed, they are inseparable. Likewise, [the sutra]

says that the “three deeds”—of body, speech, and mind—are not truly three, but one in essence.

Then it speaks of “nirvāṇa and the world,” which means the same as “nirvāṇa and life-death.”

To delight in nirvāṇa and not delight in the world is [to see] two. If one neither delights in nirvāṇa nor turns away the world, then there is no duality. Why is this so? If there were bondage, there would be liberation; but if there were no bondage from the beginning, who would seek liberation? Where there is neither bondage nor liberation, there is neither delighting nor rejecting. This is to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.

Indeed, this is precisely so.

IV

In this way, all those things that are ordinarily spoken of as two—or even as many—have been shown to be, in truth, not many but one. Finally, Mañjuśrī, who has led the bodhisattvas under the Buddha’s command to visit Vimalakīrti in his illness, is directly addressed by Vimalakīrti, who asks anew:

What is it for a bodhisattva to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality?

Mañjuśrī gives his reply, and here we come to the most crucial point of this [teaching on] entering the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality:

“In my view, with respect to all phenomena, there is no speech, no explanation, no indication, no cognition, and [complete] freedom from all questions and answers. This is what it means to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.”

That is to say, explanation and discourse can never escape duality. However detailed they may be, after all they remain within [the realm of] “two.” Mañjuśrī takes the matter a step further and replies: “As I see it, with respect to all things, there is no speech, no explanation, and complete freedom from all questions and answers.” This is a statement of the ultimate: that it cannot be explained. The Dharma Gate of Non-Duality cannot be spoken of—for to speak of it is already to fall into duality. If there were no duality, there could be no explanation. In the very act of explaining, discrimination is already at work.

Since explanation cannot occur without discrimination, the fact that the “two” are in truth “one” means that non-duality can no longer be expressed or indicated in words. It follows that we cannot consciously grasp or comprehend [non-duality]. In reality, this is so: there is neither inside nor outside, utterly beyond all discrimination, wholly one. Therefore, it cannot be spoken of. To speak of it is already to make it two. To speak of it is already to introduce discrimination into it.

This is why texts such as *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* say that true suchness is beyond all forms of words and language, calling it “free from speech.” Because it is beyond words, nothing can be said of it—and it is even impossible to say that “nothing can be said.” To say “nothing can be said” would already be to have spoken of it. This is precisely the point Mañjuśrī makes.

It is often said in Zen that Śākyamuni Buddha declared: “For forty-nine years I did not utter a single word.” This saying is explained as follows: for forty-nine years the Buddha preached in many ways, and yet in truth he never uttered a single word. This “not speaking a word” is in fact the true preaching, for only thus is the teaching truly non-dual. Thus Mañjuśrī expounded the ultimate meaning of entering [the Dharma Gate of] Non-Duality. But was Vimalakīrti truly satisfied with this reply of Mañjuśrī?

Here lies the profound depth of Vimalakīrti. Even for us, when we engage in actual practice, this is an exceptionally difficult point. It is precisely here that Mañjuśrī has not yet thoroughly penetrated [the matter]. Mañjuśrī too cannot yet be said to have entered the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality. At this juncture, Vimalakīrti is pressing Mañjuśrī to present directly and decisively [what it is] to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality, rather than asking him for an explanation. But when Vimalakīrti asks, “How do you understand it?” Mañjuśrī is ensnared in the net of words and ends up declaring that it cannot be spoken of. This is precisely what Vimalakīrti would never approve.

The approach of Zen is similar: it does not seek explanations, but demands the direct point. It looks to see how you can present that direct point. As the text says “reedom from all questions and answers,” Zen dialogue differs radically from ordinary debate; explanation is what it most strongly rejects. Zen dialogue is not a philosophical disputation [based on conceptual] decimation. Philosophy can go no further than the point reached by Mañjuśrī:

“with respect to all phenomena, there is no speech, no explanation, no indication, no cognition, and [complete] freedom from all questions and answers. This is [what it means] to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.”

This is indeed so. Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality. Thus [the text continues]:

“We have each expressed our own understanding. Now, Virtuous One, you should speak. What is it for a bodhisattva to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality?”

Here Mañjuśrī, having heard all the others, turns to Vimalakīrti and says: “We have each presented our views on how one enters the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality. Now, Vimalakīrti, please show us [what it truly means] to enter this Dharma Gate.”

But Vimalakīrti, as might be expected of him, directly manifests [the very truth] itself—that is, [what it is] to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.

The text says:

Then Vimalakīrti remained silent, without uttering a word.

This silence is not an explanation of how to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality, nor is it simply a refusal to speak because of its freedom from speech and explanation. Rather, [the very matter] of entering the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality itself is laid bare, cast forth openly, filling the whole world. At this moment, there is no world apart from Vimalakīrti; the entire world is Vimalakīrti. Silence here does not simply mean keeping quiet. In this silence, there is no distinction between silence and non-silence. If such a distinction existed, it would still be duality and not non-dual. Only silence without the opposition of silence and non-silence can be called entry into the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality. But what kind of silence is this, in which silence and non-silence are not two? This direct point cannot be explained; yet silence does not mean merely remaining wordless.

True entry into the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality is utterly free and spontaneous. This silence is like ten thousand thunders—like what is called “one silence like a thousand peals of thunder”—giving rise to all speech and explanations, unobstructed and spontaneous. To remain fixed in silence is not true silence. Every place, every time must be silence. All speech and explanations, all acts—every one of them is silence. Thus [the text says]:

Mañjuśrī praised him, saying: “Excellent, excellent! To be without letters, words, or speech—this is truly to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.”

Mañjuśrī thus praises Vimalakīrti’s silence. Yet even this praise is no more than mere praise. At this point, we ourselves must ask: “What is it to enter the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality?”

With this, I conclude my verbal explanation of the seven cases of Vimalakīrti. But

whether this explanation has been speech or non-speech, I myself do not know.

