

Seven Cases of Vimalakīrti*

Preface

I

Rather than reading through the entire text of *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra* from beginning to end, I will instead highlight seven selected points that I consider particularly significant. Over the course of seven sessions, I intend to present and discuss these “Seven Cases of Vimalakīrti” one by one.

Many of you may already be familiar with the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. It is a scripture centered on the teachings of the lay practitioner Vimalakīrti, who has long been revered as a great lay figure awakened to the root-source of the Buddha Dharma. Of course, the sutra does not consist solely of Vimalakīrti’s words; it also includes discourses by Śākyamuni Buddha, as well as teachings from other disciples and bodhisattvas. Nevertheless, the heart of the text lies in what Vimalakīrti himself expounds, and for this reason it is also known by the title *The Sutra of Vimalakīrti’s Teachings* (*Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*).

His Chinese name, rendered in three characters and pronounced in Japanese as “Yuimakitsu,” is essentially a phonetic transcription of the original Sanskrit. In everyday usage, he is often referred to simply as “Yuima.” But since the original term is *Vimalakīrti*, the name is transliterated into the three Chinese characters pronounced “Yuimakitsu” in Japanese.

The Sanskrit word *vimala* generally means “free from defilement” or “pure,” but it is also sometimes rendered with a more dynamic nuance, such as “eliminating defilements.” The word *kīrti* means “renown” or “fame,” and by extension can also mean “name.” In Chinese, the name *Vimalakīrti* can thus be translated in various ways: “Pure Name,” “Renowned for Freedom from Defilement,” or even “Renowned for Eliminating Defilements.” The most common rendering, however, is “Pure Name.”

This “Pure Name” always refers to Vimalakīrti himself, and the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* is sometimes translated as names meaning “The Pure Name Sutra” or “The Sutra of

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Renown for Freedom from Defilements.” The name *Vimalakīrti* signifies “one who has eliminated all defilements,” or “one renowned for having eliminated defilements.” In other words, purity is the essential character of *Vimalakīrti*, and in connection with this name, the sutra places great emphasis on the theme of liberation. The deepest meaning of “eliminating all defilements” is ultimately to be one who is liberated from all things.

II

Recently, the historical development of Buddhism has been studied in increasingly scientific ways, and from the perspective of text critique the origins of the sutras have been re-examined. It was once believed that all sutras originated in the time of Śākyamuni, but today scholars generally think that most were composed much later. As for the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* itself, it is now widely regarded as having been written about six centuries after Śākyamuni’s death, in the early second century CE. In fact, it is impossible to historically confirm whether the words recorded in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* were actually spoken by Śākyamuni or by *Vimalakīrti*.

Rather than debating such questions of historicity, I prefer to attend to the meaning of the text itself. I consider myself a Buddhist, but I do not readily accept something as true merely because it is attributed to Śākyamuni; in fact, I would rather not do so. Even regarding a saying attributed to Śākyamuni, my attitude is to affirm it as true only if it genuinely convinces me, and to continue to doubt it otherwise.

At the same time, I do not intend to impose my own views as if they were the only correct ones; I hope to remain open to correction by the sutras where I err or lack understanding. Therefore, whether the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* is viewed as a sermon from the Śākyamuni’s “golden lips” or as a later composition, my present approach is to understand what is stated in the sutra, while also allowing myself to be taught by it, so that I may find a way to live in truth.

III

The reason I chose the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* as the theme of my *teikō*-talks is that I am drawn to it, finding its teaching especially significant for lay Buddhism—for people like us. Traditionally, Buddhism has often carried the idea that only monks can

truly grasp the truth, or that without ordination at least one cannot become a thoroughgoing Buddhist. This sutra, however, completely overturns that notion that lay Buddhists need to yield to monks, showing clearly that even laypeople can be Buddhists that monks cannot equal.

For example, the sutra recounts that when Vimalakīrti falls ill, Śākyamuni asks bodhisattvas and his disciples to visit him. Yet all of them—Mahākāśyapa, the foremost disciple of the Buddha, followed by Śāriputra and Ānanda—refuse out of fear. Why? Because Vimalakīrti's Buddhist spiritual attainment is so profound and extraordinary that, if he were to challenge them, they would be unable to respond. Feeling unqualified, each offer an excuse to Śākyamuni. At this point, the sutra shows that even a layman with wife and children can surpass monks as a Buddhist. For laypeople like us, this is deeply meaningful and allows us to identify closely with the sutra.

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[Incidentally,], Prince Shōtoku (574–622) personally wrote a commentary on the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. Although he was a very eminent Buddhist, he was nevertheless a layman; it seems to me that for this reason he felt a very strong interest in this sūtra.

IV

We must now reflect on the significance of lay Buddhism for both the present and the future. For years I have considered this question, which comes down to: which is more fundamental, monastic Buddhism or lay Buddhism?

If I do not explain in detail, my thought may not be fully understood; but regarding true Buddhism, I believe that ultimately lay Buddhism is the fundamental form, while monastic Buddhism is only a particular case within it. From the standpoint of universality, even the particular—namely, monastic Buddhism—can exist only on the basis of the universality of lay Buddhism. Thus I think that, instead of traditional monks, new lay practitioners must appear who uphold universal Buddhism.

Considering the present situation, can traditional monastic Buddhism continue as before any longer? Looking to the future, we must rather conclude that monastic Buddhism necessarily ought to dissolve, and in fact it is already in the process of dissolution.

When I say this, I may be criticized or attacked by temples and monks; nevertheless, in reality monastic Buddhism has already almost completely dissolved. Even if one says it still exists, it remains only in a very particular corner of society, something that scarcely deserves the name of monastic Buddhism. Today in Japan there may be hundreds of thousands called monks, but very few preserve the traditional monastic life. That they can no longer maintain such a lifestyle is not entirely their own responsibility. There are causes that compel them, and so we cannot simply blame the monks alone. Yet the result is as I have said.

If we think seriously about this, we see that today's monks must live their entire lives feeling somewhat inferior and constantly anxious about their inauthenticity. This is a tragedy. Even in the Zen tradition, it is said today that at least those called *shike* or *rōshi* (masters) are authentic; but one must ask which of them truly are. Even if most are authentic, does that mean the others are false? At the very least, they are regarded today as secondary or tertiary.

I think those monks themselves cannot be satisfied with such a hopeless feeling. If that were so, one might expect them to practice diligently and become *shike* or *rōshi*, but most do not succeed, and in the future fewer will attain that. Moreover, according to someone who returned in a recent year from a journey to India and Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), even those called *shike* or *rōshi* in Japan today would be regarded there as depraved monks.¹ Judged by the rules of traditional Theravāda Buddhism, they would not qualify as monks at all.

Such a situation means that if there is no way to restore monastic Buddhism, the laity cannot be saved. Worse still, above all, there is no salvation for the monks themselves. This is the real problem of today's monks. Where, then, is the path to liberation from this problem? Since monks can no longer live as monks, they are forced to descend to a second or third rank and become indistinguishable from laypeople. But since the original standard is unclear, this results in their having to content themselves with a Buddhism doubly or triply degraded. Can we really allow Buddhism to become such a thing?

V

I have already set forth my idea that lay Buddhism must, in principle, be established as fundamental Buddhism. This is why it must be realized in practice as the foundation. Without such an establishment, the essential meaning of Buddhism itself will ultimately perish.

In my view, we need a Buddhism that can save monks as well, and that will remain true Buddhism for the future. Lay Buddhism in this sense must be established. This is the way to save contemporary Buddhism, and at the same time future Buddhism must be such a lay Buddhism. In this context, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* has profound significance.

I always keep in mind its most condensed and simple expression:

To manifest the affairs of the ordinary person without abandoning the Dharma-Way.

I am convinced that this is the fundamental principle running through the entire sutra, clearly expressing the true way of being in Buddhism. The active real-world life of Buddhism is found in this “manifesting the affairs of the ordinary person.”

Without it, Buddhism cannot truly function in the world. Yet the words mean not only the manifestation of the affairs of the ordinary person, but also “without abandoning the Dharma-Way.” In this lies the profound Buddhist root that transcends reality. In the intimate union of these two is found the fundamental principle of a life free and unhindered, which at once transcends reality and creates reality.

The true Dharma-Way is like a maternal womb or a self-as-subject, capable of actively manifesting the affairs of the ordinary person. And when through practice we establish this Dharma self-as-subject, we can truly manifest the active life of the ordinary person.

Traditional Buddhism has tended to emphasize only rebirth in paradise or the Pure Land. But the ultimate goal of Buddhism does not lie there. It is found where the Dharma-Way and the affairs of the ordinary person are completely one and not two—what the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* calls “Entering the Dharma Gate of Non-Duality.”

This expresses the true way of being in Buddhism, whose goal is not to live in some other world apart from this one, but to live in such a way that the real and the transcendent are completely one.

I wish to discuss this Dharma Gate of Non-Duality as the renewed true way of being in Buddhism. Moreover, I believe it should be proposed not only as the authentic way of being for Buddhism, but also as a way of being for all humankind. In one sense, this can be called a new humanism. The “Vow of Humankind,” expressed by our FAS Society, embodies such a way of being. If we seek such a vow in the ancient sutras, we can find it in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. Indeed, the simplest and most contemporary paraphrase of the sutra is crystallized in the “Vow of Humankind.”

Calm and composed
Let us Awaken to our True Self
Become fully compassionate humans
Make full use of our abilities
According to our respective vocations
Discern suffering
Both individual and social

And its sources
Recognize the right direction
In which history should proceed
Joining hands as kin
Beyond the differences of
Race, nation or class
Let us, with compassion
Vow to bring to realization
Our deep desire
For emancipation
And construct a world in which
All can live truly and fully
