

Seven Cases of Vimalakirti*

First Case: Sitting in Serene Repose

Manifesting the affairs of the ordinary person without abandoning the Dharma Way

I

I would like to offer *teikō* talks on seven cases drawn from the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*. For the first, I wish to treat the “sitting in serene repose” (Ch. *yanzuo*, J. *enza*), which is expounded in the Chapter on “Disciples.” Why do I discuss this expression “sitting in serene repose”? As I already said in the Preface, Vimalakīrti describes it with the expression:

Manifesting the affairs of the ordinary person without abandoning the Dharma Way.

I believe that this expression is the most essential for our present practice of the Buddha Way. Moreover, even apart from the Buddha Way, it is the most fitting expression for the ultimate way of being human. Our Society emphasizes “upright sitting” (J. *tanza*) as part of our practice. Therefore we need to examine deeply what, in the true sense, this thing called upright sitting must be. If the meaning of upright sitting is not clarified, we cannot rightly engage in this important practice of the Society. Opinions about upright sitting differ widely from person to person, and Buddhism throughout its long history has in fact not confined itself to only one meaning. Thus it is all the more necessary for us to clarify in advance what true upright sitting must be.

When people ordinarily speak of upright sitting, they think of the explanations of the sitting method in the *Zazen Manuals* (*Zazengi*), where the correct bodily posture and mental attitude are prescribed in detail. The realm of upright sitting that we reach through practice under such conditions of body and mind is called by Dōgen “body and mind dropped off.” This corresponds to what is generally described by words such as *nirvāṇa* or *sūnyatā* (emptiness). The ultimate realm of upright sitting is that in which one enters *nirvāṇa* without destroying the body

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given us by our parents. In this sense, nirvāṇa, which is the ultimate realm of upright sitting, is not the so-called nirvāṇa attainable only after the death of the body. Rather, it is what is expressed by the words: “Attaining realization here in this world.”

II

Such upright sitting, expressed by the words “Attaining realization here in this world,” must not mean merely that the body takes the regular posture shown in the *Zazen Manuals* or that the mind simply calms down and stays quiet. On the contrary, as it is said: “The Dharma is free from form,” it entirely lacks bodily form, and also the so-called mental form, the heart or consciousness. In short, it must be “formless” both bodily and mentally.

Therefore Vimalakīrti, as shown in the Chapter on the Disciples, reproaches Śāriputra, who in the forest only sits quietly and silently, and refutes him, saying: *“Sitting in serene repose means not to manifest body nor mind in the Three Worlds.”* The words *“not to manifest body nor mind in the Three Worlds”* mean, as I just explained, to be formless, so that no form of body or mind exists there. This is what I have often called “Eastern nothingness” (*tōyōteki mu*), “acting-subjective nothingness,” or “nothingness-acting-subject”

Consequently, since there is no body or mind there, there is no inside nor outside, nor middle; thus it is the case that it is neither inside nor outside. Vimalakīrti describes this with the words:

Not abiding in the mind, nor being outside it; this is called sitting in serene repose.

Because the true realm of upright sitting is already neither inside nor outside, nothing determined remains there. It is not any “thing” at all. In other words, the self of upright sitting, completely beyond all determinations, can in this sense be called self-abiding and free in the ultimate sense of the word. Because it is nothing, it is liberated from everything: from birth-and-death, from evil passions, from all causes and conditions, even from all Buddhas. Namely, it is what in Buddhism is called the emancipated self. Upright sitting alone enables us to be freed from all bonds and fetters. This is ultimate and absolute human liberation. Through upright sitting we can become awakened ones, truly awakened to Buddha-nature.

There are various Buddhist expressions, for example “returning to the source” in the Huayan (J. Kegon), “the aspect of going” in Pure Land Buddhism, and “the gate of sweeping away” in Zen. These correspond to what is called the *via negativa*, which presents nothing other than the final culmination of upright sitting. And that which the “Vow of Humanity” of our Society expresses in simple words such as “Calm and composed / Let us awaken to our true self,” in fact points to self-awakening attained in upright sitting.

III

However, if the self of upright sitting is only that in which body and mind have dropped off, or if it simply does not manifest body and mind in the three worlds, then it still cannot be called true sitting. As [is evident from] my calling it the “nothing-acting-subject,” the body-and-mind-dropped-off that is attained in true upright sitting—in other words, *nirvāṇa* or *śūnyatā* or nothingness—must in fact function as the acting subject. In Buddhism, *nirvāṇa* and *śūnyatā* are sometimes regarded merely as tranquility or serenity without mental or physical form. But that is only empty *śūnyatā*, obstinate nothingness; it is entirely different from true *nirvāṇa*. If *nirvāṇa* were only such a state, it would be completely separated from reality, and would become something wholly unrelated to the various human activities in the world—it would be, so to speak, nothing other than escapist and hermitic.

Nevertheless, upright sitting is often misunderstood as something like that. Zen severely criticizes it as the “evil Zen of silent illumination,” or as “falling into the cave of demons.” Because Sōtō Zen tends to degenerate into such a sitting practice, the Chinese Zen master Dahui (J. Daie Sōkō, 1089–1163) accused it of being the evil Zen of silent illumination, and later the Japanese Zen master Hakuin (1686–1769) condemned it with particular severity. Truly, such Zen cannot but be called “the Zen of the dead.” Such corpses, though tranquil, do not move their hands or legs; they are in no way different from trees or rocks.

Zen records often describe the state of sitting with the words “like trees or rocks,” but that expression is only a metaphor for the mindless realm of “body and mind dropped off.” The self of upright sitting, however, is not confined to that. In fact, that mindless “tree or rock” must be the nowhere-subject of action, which manifests as all thoughts and deeds, functioning in the world. Only as such can it be

the subject and source of all real functions. The self of “body and mind dropped off” must be the formless self, the acting subject of unobstructed, free functions.

IV

In Buddhism it is said that nirvāṇa is the “Wisdom-body” (J. *chitai*), which means the acting subject awakened to nirvāṇa; and the fact that it is called “body” means that it is already the acting subject as the source of all functions, possessing all capacities. Vimalakīrti says:

Manifesting all conduct without rising from nirvāṇa.

This means that nirvāṇa is the acting subject and all functions arise out of it.

Accordingly, sitting in serene repose is not simply something absolutely negative, which does not manifest body and mind in the Three Worlds. Nirvāṇa without body and mind also becomes the self-subject from which all functions manifest freely and self-abidingly, with absolute positivity. This must be the essence of sitting in serene repose.

The same is said in the following phrase in the seventh Chapter on “Seeing Living Beings”:

Establishing all dharmas from the source with nothing on which to abide.

Moreover, it is in this sense of sitting in serene repose that we must truly understand the phrase “Calm and composed / Let us awaken to our true self” (the opening words of the Vow of Humanity).

Thus, to awaken to true self is to awaken to the self that functions, being formless and yet manifesting all forms—just like the great ocean, which, while freeing itself from all wave-forms, and being formless, brings forth thousands upon thousands of waves upon its surface without leaving a trace. This is true sitting; and only in such sitting do all functions remain inseparable from sitting, so that we can, in the words of the Chinese Chan master Linji (d. 866), “be the master of all situations.”

The *Song of Awakening* says:

Walking is also Zen / Sitting is also Zen / Speaking, silent, moving, staying/ The subject is at peace.

Linji further proclaims:

The Dharma named Mind is formless and penetrates all ten directions.

This Zen, this Mind-Dharma is nothing other than the true sitting described above. Sitting that occurs only while you actually sit and disappears when you rise is only a specific aspect of body and mind; it cannot be sitting as the acting subject of all functions. If you truly “sit well,” your sitting is not something that is lost in movement; true sitting is such that it becomes ever firmer in thousands of movements. It is sitting that can function with an ever greater composure, so that we may make quick and appropriate responses to the changing, dizzying realities of the world, and “construct a world which is both true and happy” (according to the conclusion of the Vow of Humanity).

However, if sitting, as is often thought, is only a refuge to avoid the disturbances of historical reality, or a static “windless zone” incapable of functioning as a formative and creative subject of world-construction, then it is escape—it is something qualitatively different from what we are speaking of. That sitting must be a positive, active, and subjective source, not bound to any existing or created things, nor even to the act of creation itself; and further—or precisely therefore—unobstructed and free, it tirelessly creates forever a history that is true and happy. The progress of scientific knowledge, the growth of machine civilization, and the complication of social organizations—things that ought to be blessed as human evolution and historical development—are often cursed as signs of human loss or dehumanization, accompanied by powerless cries such as “return to nature.” This only occurs because of a lack of true sitting. True sitting can no longer be confined to quiet places such as mountains and monasteries; it must be precisely in the midst of creating history and constructing the world. To construct the world by means of this sitting as the subject of action—this is the true meaning of sitting in serene repose, of which it is said in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*:

Manifesting the affairs of the ordinary person without abandoning the Dharma Way.
