

# Vimalakirti & the sickness of all beings

*including an introduction to the paramitas*

## Message from Guy Mokuhô Mercier



My dear friends of the Way.

Sickness is present everywhere in the world, this is a fact. We all know about so many sufferings which result from it, and feel ourselves to be totally powerless in such a situation. At this moment, we see true acts of generosity appear spontaneously, and exemplary conduct just like that of bodhisattvas, who symbolise the Buddhist ideal, but at the same time, really horrible attitudes and an inextinguishable thirst in some who try to profit from this suffering.

It's a very opportune moment to remember the teachings of the sutra of Inconceivable Freedom, subtitled "*The teachings of Vimalakirti*" a major text and one of the most beautiful pearls of Mahayana Buddhism.

What lesson can we draw, each one of us, in the face of the painful intensity of this epidemic which is affecting all people now, obliging them to live in confinement, separating them from each other.

What does the Sutra of Inconceivable Freedom say?

"The layman Vimalakirti, a model of Buddhist accomplishment, worked for the good of beings by suggesting innumerable expedients for salvation. He was gifted with all the qualities of a Buddha. He had realised patience in respect to the non-existence of birth and death, the emptiness of all things, and his eloquence was a match for all obstacles. He had adopted the majestic bearing of the Awakened and his heart was vast as the ocean. His only concern was for the good of all beings."

Is there any person in the world today who could match these characteristics?

The innumerable qualities of the bodhisattva Vimalakirti are also ours. But how can we use these virtues to assist all beings? This is the great question that has its answer in the heart of the practice of the Buddhist Way.

How can we stop lying to ourselves, only thinking of ourselves, of our appearance, our security and our comfort at the expense of others?

No being can have an existence without the presence of others. Recognising this interdependence frees the hidden qualities of the bodhisattva within us, to put them to the service of others. It is just as much a personal liberation as a collective one.

It was very clever of Vimalakirti to make people think he was ill. For, because he was ill, the king, ministers, householders, lay adepts, brahmins, princes, functionaries and many thousands of people came to see him, to get his news and benefit from his teachings.

Buddha begged his disciples, successively, to go to Vimalakirti's bedside to get news of his health.

All the great disciples, Shariputra, Maudgalyana, Kashyapa, Subhuti, Purna, Katyayana, Aniruddha, Upali, Rahula, Ananda, Maitreya and many other bodhisattvas, who had already met Vimalakirti, expressed their reluctance, and refused the Buddha's request. Each one of them had previously received criticism from Vimalakirti about their understanding and practice of the teachings. And each one of them was very afraid of once more coming face to face with such a being and being thought ignorant. This is to show how insignificant and ashamed they felt at the very idea of meeting Vimalakirti.

The exchanges that took place with each one of the disciples in turn with Vimalakirti are of shining depth and mind blowing. As the sutra explains, Vimalakirti's answers penetrated "the real appearance of things" a synonym for the word emptiness, which makes one single Truth from Impermanence and Reality. This is also the essential theme of the Sutra of Great Wisdom, Hannyā, the Heart Sutra.

Each one of us should study these mondos deeply to understand the correct attitude to cultivate in order to manifest our spiritual life in our everyday life, to develop our understanding of Reality and to allow our bodhisattva nature to emerge.

Eventually Manjushri, who was braver than the others, agreed to go to Vimalakirti to ask after his health and to take him the sublime thoughts of Buddha.

After a welcome that in itself shows the magnitude of Vimalakirti's realisation, the exchange begins:

Manjushri asked Vimalakirti:

"Tell me if your sickness is bearable, if it becomes less with certain treatment, or if it gets worse? The Venerable One has asked me to get news of you. So, lay adept, what is the cause of your sickness? Will it last a long time? How will it end?"

Vimalakirti replied:

"My sickness comes from ignorance and thirst. I am sick because all beings are sick, and my sickness will only end on the day that all beings are cured. It is on behalf of beings that the bodhisattva plunges into the circle of death and rebirth (Samsara) Between birth and death, that's where there is sickness.

When beings get better, so does the bodhisattva.

You ask me the cause of my sickness. Truly, the bodhisattva's sickness has only one cause, that is compassion."

The exchange between Manjushri and Vimalakirti is extremely transparent and clear, ceaselessly expanding the limits of our understanding towards the Source, the Origin of things and their appearance as real. Every practitioner, every disciple of Buddha, should read and re-read these 'Sermons' as each reading makes us discover a new facet of the sparkling diamond of the Great Wisdom and penetrate into the splendour of the bodhisattva mind.

It is in the heart of meditation that, suddenly or progressively, we develop understanding of what the Great Wisdom is, an intuitive understanding and a vision of emptiness. The true end of suffering that we call Nirvana, results when we see that the 'me' which we believe to be real, is just a dream, an illusion, that things have no real nature, that is to say, they only appear due to causes and conditions, which in their turn have no beginning or end, and that trying to seize and own things is to suffer in vain.

The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, speaking to Shariputra in the Sutra of Great Wisdom, as the bodhisattva Vimalakirti responding to Manjushri in the Sutra of Inconceivable Freedom, teach the Prajnaparamita, transcendental wisdom or the perfection of wisdom. Maka Hannya in Japanese. This wisdom is the legitimate terrain and true nature of every being.

To be understood on a daily basis, this Wisdom is broken down into several paramitas, practices of perfection or virtues that each being should cultivate to achieve liberation.

The paramitas "*practices to reach the other bank*" are the foundation of life of all beings in the continuum of existence. The 'other bank' is liberation, things are seen as they are, illusion is seen to be an illusion.

They indicate appropriate conduct for each circumstance, each relationship, right conduct for reaching the end of suffering.

They are universal and we know them in two ways: from an intuitive understanding of what is true and correct, which each being is endowed with, and on the other hand, from our true nature, of which the paramitas are the light. Every being knows intuitively what are their virtues and values, but they don't want to see or practise them. They may even have forgotten them in seeking to satisfy their continual desire to find happiness in objects.

The paramitas are six in number:

*Dana* – giving, charity, generosity  
*Shila* – discipline, morality  
*Ksanti* – patience  
*Virya* – determination, effort, perseverance.  
*Dhyana* – meditation, peace and deep vision.  
*Prajna* – wisdom, discernment.

Certain buddhist traditions add four more:

*Upaya* – correct action  
*Pranidhana* – pious vows  
*Bala* – resolution  
*Jnana* – knowledge of the correct definition of all the dharmas, the phenomena.

Each paramita includes all the others, that is to say that in the practice of each virtue, we need to bring all the others in to perfect it.

In the actual circumstances of this pandemic-ridden spring, it seems more apt to talk about patience, a virtue that is often abandoned, but which we need so much just now, whilst living our daily life in confinement.

That will be for the next communication.

Take care of yourselves and others.

With all my best wishes.

**Guy Mokuhô.**