

Meeting Vimalakirti

Questions invite revelation. And Vimalakirti, a fictional character who comes alive through Mahayana Buddhist scripture, is as renowned for his wisdom as for stirring things up, even among the Buddha's closest disciples. The living force of a question from the heart may lead you on—lead you on to something much richer than any fulfilled expectation or aim or cozy notion. Portrayed in the *Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti* as a fully realized human being, Vimalakirti reveals himself as a master of the great mystery of call and response. He has a way of showing up that is surprising, even irritating, even mortifying, when you least expect it. He has a way of showing up even before you realize you have a question! As he says to one of the Buddha's disciples, who was entirely unprepared for such meeting:

Reverend Mahamaudgalyayana, how could there be a teaching in regard to such a Dharma? Reverend Mahamaudgalyayana, even the expression "to teach the Dharma" is presumptuous, and those who listen to it listen to presumption. Reverend Maudgalyayana, where there are no presumptuous words, there is no teacher of the Dharma, no one to listen, and no one to understand. It is as if an illusory person were to teach the Dharma to illusory people.

The writer of the *Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti* is nameless. And we have no idea of just where the scripture was written or when, though it was probably written between the first century BCE and the first century CE. All this indeterminacy, though, seems in keeping with the spirit of a text whose alternate title is *Inconceivable Liberation*. As we

read it, we may find ourselves each and each, one and all, engaging with Vimalakirti in ways we could not have foreseen.

Vimalakirti is depicted as being close with the Buddha, but he is no spiritual seeker. After all, how can any identity, no matter how impressive, really fill any sense of lack or deficient emptiness one carries within? In this light, a seeker of enlightenment is no different from a seeker of riches and acknowledgment and fame. An identity gives you something to cling to, like a bit of driftwood in a sea of suffering. But Vimalakirti is utterly impoverished, as he has nothing to cling to, not even the notion of himself as a realized being. —How is this possible? one might ask. Vimalakirti is also known as an impeccable man of the world, a responsible and dignified adult. He is a father, husband, businessman, and an integral part of the community in which he lives. He is present to his life, very simply. Indeed, Vimalakirti is so authentically himself that bodhisattvas and gods and multitudes of people from all stations in life bow low to him. He wears no disguises.

Mahakasyapa, another great disciple of the Buddha, spoke of his meeting with Vimalakirti in this way:

Lord, when I heard this teaching, I was astonished and thought:

“Reverence to all bodhisattvas! If a lay bodhisattva may be endowed with such eloquence, who is there who would not conceive the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment?”

The Good News is everybody’s Good News. We may all take heart in our buddha nature.

Vimalakirti is entirely at home and at ease in himself and the world. As his realization permeates every part of his life, he is a fully integrated human being. As there is nothing missing, he has no reason to look outside himself. As there is nothing for him to transform or to improve, nothing to desire or push away, he can simply trust in the nature of his experience. He has no hope, for anything. Fearlessness is merely a concept, and he has surrendered all need for concepts, images, reactivity. There is no part of him, no trace even so fine as a dust mote, that is split away or rejected. Vimalakirti lives in the world of convention, but he does not buy into it. He does not try to keep it in his hands.

The scripture is full of spirited encounters between Vimalakirti and various disciples of the Buddha, encounters so spirited, in fact, that the disciples are reluctant to ever call on Vimalakirti again, even when he is sick and at home in bed. Venerable Shariputra, for instance, recalls the moment when he was seated at the foot of a tree, absorbed in quiet contemplation, minding his own business, when suddenly he found himself face to face with Vimalakirti, who offers him a profound teaching on the essence of meditation. “Lord,” Shariputra tells the Buddha, “when I heard this teaching, I was unable to reply and remained silent.” Even before you know it, Vimalakirti reveals the door of non-duality, the door already and always open, for any who wish to enter. But it may seem hard to accept the challenge.

Some of us may not believe that growth is possible in our lives. We may wonder how it is possible in our world to exist authentically, and receive support for that. We may feel it is all a hopeless matter, and that includes spiritual practice. But Vimalakirti is too compassionate and too wise for that. He meets us on our own ground. Mirroring our buddha nature, he draws us forth so we may meet ourselves as we truly are. Asking our

questions, we may discover an expanding sense of confidence and trust. Asking our questions, we may discover that it is possible to let go of all our notions and disguises. Even that of a student.

By asking our innermost questions, we may discover for ourselves a treasure greater than any answer.

—*Camille Hykes*