

Revisioning Buddhism 8

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

Vimalakirti's illness

One of the most beautiful Mahāyāna statements is found in the Vimalakirti Nirdeśa (The Teaching of Vimalakirti). In chapter 5, the layman bodhisattva Vimalakirti lies sick, and is visited by a big group of holy beings, headed by Manjusri. When Manjusri asks why he is sick, Vimalakirti replies,

“Manjusri, as long as there are ignorance and the thirst for existence, there is this illness of mine. As long as all beings are sick, there is this illness of mine. Were all living beings free from illness, then I too would not be sick.

What is the reason for this? Manjusri, a bodhisattva remains in samsara for the sake of living beings; for samsara itself is an illness. Were all living beings free of illness, the bodhisattva too would be free of illness.

For example, Manjusri, when the seth's only son is sick, both his parents become sick, too. And the parents will suffer as long as their only son has not recovered. Even so, Manjusri, the bodhisattva loves all living beings as if each were his only child. He becomes sick when they are sick; when they recover, he recovers.”

Manjusri asks, “Where does your illness come from?”

“The illness of the bodhisattvas arises from great compassion.”

Like any Buddhist text, we should experience these words. The best way is to take one of roles, either Manjusri or Vimalakirti. This helps in our feeling the sense of the passage. In the end, they are the same: here, Manjusri is our inquiring mind; Vimalakirti is our higher wisdom. We are the bodhisattvas.

When we ask ourselves a Dharma question, it will answer itself if we listen hard enough. This is a dialogue of the heart and mind.

We cannot be truly a Buddhist if we do not feel suffering; that is, our own sufferings and those of others. Just as the four elements (earth, water, fire and wind) inside us and the four elements outside us are the same elements, even so, our sufferings and those of others are the same. Only selfishness makes us think that they are different. This is spiritual wisdom.

When we understand that how we suffer is the same as how others suffer, we appreciate the being of others, that they are in real pain, too. And we would meaningfully respond to the pains of others. We then have active and wise compassion.

The suffering of someone hit by a tsunami or an earthquake is no different from the pains of someone near us who has lost his job, or going through a divorce, or some other personal

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problem. Natural disasters happen all the time somewhere on our planet. We tend to be shocked because of their scale.

If we are truly and wisely compassionate, we understand that the pains of those who have lost loved ones, homes, and property, are the same as those who are suffering silently in loneliness, or in illness, or with some problems here in our midst. My point is that the magnitude of suffering cannot really be compared or measured, even between two individuals.

It is often subjective, that is, it is our bias, that makes us think which people need more help or which suffering is bigger than another. Maybe we feel more important helping those in bigger disasters, but those suffering poverty near us are not as important: this is not true compassion.

We should first respond to the pains of those nearest to us because they are within our reach to help. It would be rather improper if we let those near us suffer, and we go way far out to help others. As a Malay saying goes: “Milking a monkey in the forest, but our child at home dies of starvation” (Monyet di hutan disusukan, anak sendiri di rumah mati kelaparan).

Of course, with more of us working together in wisdom and compassion, we can cover a wider area to help more of those suffering.

All those who are suffering are like our children. This means that if one of our children is recovering from an accident, and another suffering from a fever, we would still attend to both of them as if each is our only son. Compassion means never comparing or measuring how people suffer, but knowing that they are suffering, and responding accordingly.

Nor should we be slow in helping others. For, charity delayed is charity denied.

To have great compassion means to always keep in mind, thus:

“Let no one suffer in my midst! Let no one suffer if I can help it. Let no one far or near suffer! I will never tell a suffering person, ‘It’s all right.’ Instead, I will ask, ‘Why are you suffering? How can I help?’ And I will act on it.

For, my pains arise from great compassion. My pains push me to share and to give. Let me not give till it hurts, but rather let me give till I cry in joy.”

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