

Close reading of a passage from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*

Before I do the close reading of a passage from the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, let me introduce and sum up the main idea of this sūtra.

Although the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* is neither a popular devotional text nor a base for subsequent school as in the cases of the *The Lotus Sūtra (Saddharma puṇḍarīka-sūtra)*, the *Pure Land Sūtras (Sukhāvātīvyūha-sūtra, Amitāyurdhyāna-sūtra)*, and *Flower Garland Sūtra (Buddhāvataṃsaka-sūtra)*, it is considered as one of the most important and favorite Sūtras in East Asian Mahāyāna tradition with its non-dual principles and its elaboration on the *Perfection of Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā)* literature through the unsurpassed eloquence and thunderous silence of the lay man *Vimalakīrti*. This great bodhisattva, who has relinquished “pure land” of the Buddha *Akṣobhya* to take the rebirth in this world in order to teach sentient beings, manifests skillfully as an ideal religious literati and cultivator. In spite of having family and children, he remains celibate. In spite of being rich, he has no desire. In spite of being a layman and manifesting as a sick person, he defeats everyone, including the monastics and lay people, who come to engage in religious conversation with him, except the Buddhas.

His main episode starts with the raining of heavenly flowers, instantaneous gender reversals, and the appearance of *Akṣobhya* Buddha teaching through the means of fragrance in the *Wondrous Joy (Abhirati)* country. As in the *Flower Adornment Sūtra*'s description of a dust mote containing three worldly systems, his tiny chamber accommodates limitless numbers of celestial Bodhisattvas, heavenly beings, and other visible beings, who share their seats without overlapping each other on magnificent

thrones with unimaginable sizes. Similarly, this tiny chamber contains a separate world-system with all of its mountains, continents, rivers, and oceans. To accord with sentient beings' potential and to bring benefit for them, he encourages them to embark on either the paths of self-enlightenment of Arahatsip or the Ultimate enlightenment of Buddhahood mostly through the monastic trainings.

Next, let us go into details about the following passage:

Then the Buddha told Śāriputra, “There is a country called *Wondrous Joy (Abhirati)*, where the Buddha is entitled *Akṣobhya (Immovable)*. *Vimalakīrti* died in that country prior to being born here.”

Śāriputra said, “This unprecedented! World-honored One, this person is able to forsake a pure land and come take pleasure in this place of great anger and harm.”

***Vimalakīrti* said to Śāriputra, “What do you think? When the sun’s light appears, is it conjoined with darkness?”**

[Śāriputra] answered, “No. When the sun’s light appears, the darkness disappears.”

***Vimalakīrti* said, “Why does the sun come to *Jambudvīpa*?”**

[Śāriputra] answered, “To illuminate it and eliminate the darkness.”

***Vimalakīrti* said, “Bodhisattvas are like this. Even though they are born in impure Buddha lands in order to convert sentient beings, they are not therefore conjoined with the darkness of stupidity. They merely extinguish the darkness of the afflictions of sentient beings.”**

This passage is extracted from the *Vimalakīrti -nirdesa-Sūtra*, translated by Paul and McRae on page 167. In this passage the translators use modern grammatical style in unison. Using simple structure for the sentences and common vocabularies, the

translators keep the Sanskrit words for special names, terms, and places such as *Śāriputra*, *Akṣobhya*, and others. Let me analyze word by word, and sentence by sentence this passage.

Then the Buddha told *Śāriputra*.

This complete and simple sentence continues the previous passage. Here, *Śāriputra* asks *Vimalakīrti* where this layman died to become born here.¹ He begins with a conversation between the Buddha and his great disciple, *Śāriputra*, who is considered to be the Buddha's foremost student in transcendental wisdom according to the Theravada tradition.² The Buddha continues as below.

“There is a country called *Wondrous Joy (Abhirati)*,³ where the Buddha is entitled *Akṣobhya (Immovable)*.⁴

In this simple structural sentence, the Buddha introduces to *Śāriputra* a cosmos country named *Wondrous Joy (Abhirati)*⁵ and a Buddha, *Akṣobhya (Immovable)*,⁶ who presides in that country.

¹ From page 166 to page 167.

² *Śāriputra* is a chief disciple of the Buddha and a lifelong friend of *Mahamaudgalyayana*. After following the sceptic *Sanjaya Belatthuputta*, both *Śāriputra* and *Mahamaudgalyayana* converted to Buddhism, became the chief disciples of the Buddha on their ordination day, and both achieved to Arhatship. Later on, the Buddha declared *Śāriputra* as a perfect disciple and second only to himself in transcendent knowledge (*Prajñā*). The Buddha frequently approved of *Śāriputra*'s teaching and considered this disciple as a General of the Dharma (Pali, *Dhammasenapati*). With his special expertise in analytical philosophy, he is considered as the founder of the *Abhidharma* tradition. He has exemplary qualities of compassion, patience, and humility. He passed away a few months before the Buddha. (Damien Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 253.)

³ The eastern Buddha-field or Pure Land associated with the Buddha *Akṣobhya* and described in the *Akṣobhya -tathagatasya-vyuha Sūtra*. This Sūtra was not popular of the Pure Land of *Sukhāvati* even if it focused on some devotional aspects in early *Mahāyāna*. (Keown, 3.)

⁴ *Akṣobhya* (The Immovable One) Buddha is associated with a belief in his Pure Land, *Abhirati* in early *Mahāyāna*. He is also *sambhoga-kaya* Buddha associated with the eastern quarter, and he is viewed as the embodiment of Mirror-like Awareness, one of the five awarenesses and as the lord of the *Vajra* family. (Keown, 8.)

⁵ In this Buddha land, there is no illness, no lying, no ugliness, and no smelly things. There are no jails and no non-Buddhists. There is no farm and no farming. There is no trader and no trading. Trees produce flowers and bear fruit. They produce fragrant and beautiful garments. Food and drink appear as one wishes. There is no jealousy in this pure land. The women are beautiful, and they are freed from the curse of

***Vimalakīrti*⁷ died in that country prior to being born here.”**

In this simple sentence, it mentions that a lay man, *Vimalakīrti*, died in that country of Wondrous Joy before taking a rebirth in *Sahā* world.⁸

Next is the conversation between *Śāriputra* and *Vimalakīrti*, who represent early Buddhist (or Hinayanist) and Mahāyāna perspectives, respectively. According to the early Buddhism, *Śāriputra* became the chief disciple of the Buddha on his ordination day and achieved Arhatship shortly afterward. Later on, the Buddha declared *Śāriputra* as a perfect disciple and second only to himself in transcendent knowledge (prajna). The Buddha frequently approved of *Śāriputra*'s teaching and considered this disciple as a General of the Dharma (Pali, *Dhammasenapati*). With his special expertise in analytical philosophy, he is considered as the founder of the *Abhidharma* tradition. He has exemplary qualities of compassion, patience, and humility.⁹ However, in this Mahāyāna Sūtra's perspective, *Śāriputra* is portrayed as an Arhat who still attaches to the forms of sitting (when he sees no seat inside *Vimalakīrti*'s chamber), eating (when he asks himself

menstruation. There is happiness at all times, as the inhabitants of this land play and sing. Sentient beings are without any sexual desire in this land, as they derive their joy from the Dharma. It is fully qualified as a pure land. (George Mclean, Vensus A George, *Paths to The Divine: Ancient and Indian* (Washington, D.C: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2008), 489.)

⁶ *Akṣobhya* is the Buddha of the Buddha Land named *Abhirati*, which is far away in the East. In that land, very long ago, a monk vows to follow the path of full Buddhahood. He makes a series of vows and strictly keeps them. Finally, he obtains Buddhahood. His Buddha land and its beauty tempts devotees to rise up to that level. (Mclean, 489.)

⁷ *Vimalakīrti*.

⁸ The world that must be endured (Ch. 娑婆世界). Transliteration of the Sanskrit, meaning “the secular world” — “that which bears,” the earth 地; interpreted as bearing, enduring; the place of good and evil; a universe, or great chiliocosm. This world that we live in. The corrupt world. The world in which Śākyamuni teaches. Where all are subject to transmigration and which a Buddha transforms. It is divided into three regions 三界 and *Mahābrahmā Sahāmpati* is its lord. Other forms: 娑婆世界; 娑界; 娑槃; 娑訶; 沙訶; 索訶. [cmuller; source(s): Soothill]. [http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?5a.xml+id\('b5a11-5a46'\)](http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?5a.xml+id('b5a11-5a46')). (accessed October 23, 2010).

⁹ Keown, 253.

about how the Bodhisattvas eat), and flowers (of a goddess which did not fall down on the top of the Buddha's great disciples).

Regarding *Vimalakīrti*, he expediently manifests his illness to create the opportunity to expound the highest Mahāyāna doctrines for whoever comes to visit him. Acknowledging the situation, *Śākyamuni* Buddha advised his ten great disciples to pay a visit to *Vimalakīrti*. However, most great monks declined to visit *Vimalakīrti* because of their previous experiences with him. He corrected some of their faults in understanding and practicing the doctrines. For instance, when *Śāriputra* was sitting in repose beneath a tree, *Vimalakīrti* approached and corrected *Śāriputra* how to sit properly according to Mahāyāna principle.

Next, let us go back to the passage.

Śāriputra said, “This unprecedented! World-honored One, this person is able to forsake a pure land and come take pleasure in this place of great anger and harm.”

This sentence describes how an astounded Arhat praises the layman *Vimalakīrti*, who has forsaken a pure land to take pleasure on the rebirth in the place of great anger and harm. Usually, the early Buddhist monks cultivated meditation with the preference of achieving the Nirvana in order to get out of the *Sahā* world, which is a world that one must “endure” anger and danger from other sentient beings, whose mental fluctuations may be easily ignited by their angry and craving thoughts, which may in turn endanger their life as well as that of others. Indeed, it depicts *Śāriputra*'s inspiration of a Bodhisattva who is joyful to take a rebirth in this impure and dangerous place instead of dwelling in a pure and peaceful place of the Buddha land. Generally, in Buddha land,

there is no illness, no lying, no ugliness, and no smelly things. There are no jails and no non-Buddhists. There is no farm and no farming. There is no trader and no trading. Trees produce flowers and bear fruit. They produce fragrant and beautiful garments. Food and drink appear as one wish. There is no jealousy in this pure land. The women are beautiful, and they are freed from the curse of menstruation. There is happiness at all times, as the inhabitants of this land play and sing. Sentient beings are without any sexual desire in this land, as they derive their joy from the Dharma. We can understand why *Śāriputra* has this typical inspiration through paradoxical appearances of an Arhat wishing to get out of this angry and dangerous *Sahā* world to abide in the eternal peace; and a Bodhisattva's willingness to leave the Buddha's pure land to take rebirth in a defiled and dangerous *Sahā* world. According to this Sūtra's perspective, *Śāriputra* represents a Hinayanist, who considered this *Sahā* world as an impure place. Specifically, there is a passage in this Sūtra, which contains a question that *Śāriputra* inquired of the Buddha why he appeared in this impure planet. The Buddha replied that, "It is through the transgressions of sentient beings that they do not see the purity of the Tathāgata's (i.e., the Buddha land). This is not the Tathāgata's fault! *Śāriputra*, this land of mine is pure, but you do not see it."¹⁰

Here, the Buddha pointed out that his land is pure, but *Śāriputra* and other beings could not recognize its unique characteristics because of their ignorance. Also, the Buddha demonstrated through his action, "At this the Buddha pointed to the earth with his toe, and instantly one billion worlds¹¹ were as if ornamented with a hundred thousand

¹⁰ Diana Paul and John McRae, trans., *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center For Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004), 78.

¹¹ (Ch. 三千大千世界; Skt. *trisāhasra-mahāsāhasra-loka-dhātu*; Pali *ti-sahassī-mahā-sahassīloka-dhātavo*). A great *trichiliocosm*; the worlds that constitute the domain of the Buddha. A world consists of the world of desire and the first heaven of the world of form. One thousand times one thousand times one

jewels. It was like the Jewel Ornamentation land, with all its immeasurable merits, of Jewel Ornament Buddha. The entire great assembly exclaimed at this unprecedented event, and they all saw themselves sitting on many-jeweled lotus flowers. The Buddha told *Śāriputra*, ‘You should now observe the purity of this Buddha land.’

Śāriputra said, ‘So it is, World-honored One. Originally I did not see it; originally I did not hear it. Now the purity of the Buddha’s country is entirely apparent.’

The Buddha said to *Śāriputra*, ‘My Buddha country is always pure, like this. It is only so as to save inferior persons here that I manifest it as a defiled and impure land. It is like the many-jeweled eating utensils used in common by the gods, the food in which is of different colors depending on their merits. Just so, *Śāriputra*, if a person’s mind is pure he sees the merits and ornaments of this land.’¹²

Here the Buddha describes his land as a pure land through his pure mind by touching the earth, which is transformed from a defiled land into the land of *Jewel Ornamentation* that only can be seen by a pure mind person.

In addition, to portray *Śāriputra* as a Hinayanist, the author of this Sūtra intensifies *Śāriputra*’s discrimination of pure and impure lands in a conventional perspective. Here, pure land can be described as a place of golden solid earth, jewelry trees, crystal houses, and others; namely no trace of defilement ever exists. People in this pure land can enjoy all kinds of happiness such as having long life and eating any type of food they like.

Moreover, the Buddha explains in detail the significant meaning of a pure land, which he does not consider externally as a solid and pure earthly place in physical or material term. Actually, he views it as the manifestation of certain mental qualifications

thousand makes one billion. Commonly abbreviated as 三千; 三千界, 三千世界. It is a way of describing the vastness and interwovenness of the universe in ancient Indian cosmology. [起信論 T 1666.32.583a28] [cmuller; source(s): JEBD]. [http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?4e.xml+id\('b4e09-5343-5927-5343-4e16-754c'\)](http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?4e.xml+id('b4e09-5343-5927-5343-4e16-754c')). (accessed October 23, 2010).

¹² Paul and McRae, 79.

through the practices of mind's purification, including: sincerity; a profound mind; the mind of *Bodhi*; charity (*dāna*); morality; forbearance; exertion (*vīrya*); meditation (*dhyāna*); wisdom (*prajñā*); the four unlimited states of mind; the four means of attraction; skillful means; the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment; the attitude of rededication [of merit]; explaining how to eliminate the eight difficult realms [where the Buddha and Dharma are unknown]; maintaining one's own practice of the precepts without reviling the deficiencies of others; and the ten goods.¹³ Hence, whoever has these qualifications can obtain the pure land here and now.

Conversely, an impure land includes all kind of defilement objects such as dusty sand, dirty water, polluted air, and others. In this impure land people deal with all kinds of problems such as looking for job to earn salary and doing business for making money. Also, they harbor all kinds of mental afflictions such as stress, anxiety and depression. In this passage, the Buddha describes how the lay man *Vimalakīrti* takes the joy to be reborn in this impure land. This is one of the most important attitudes and principles of Mahāyāna practitioners, who are willing and happy to engage actively in the impure place and to assist problematic people to transform their mental affliction and negative outlook. Namely, to understand, practice, and realize the Buddha's teachings are not for self-benefits. These Bodhisattvas actively apply these teachings in the impure land to help impure people, i.e. benefiting others. In short, because inhabitants of the pure land do not need as much care as the inhabitants in the impure land, the lay man *Vimalakīrti* joyfully takes rebirth in the impure land to rescue sentient beings.

Next, *Vimalakīrti* utilizes the metaphor of sun's light as wisdom and darkness as ignorance to illustrate his approach.

¹³ Paul and McRae, 76-77.

Next, *Vimalakīrti* said to *Śāriputra*, **“What do you think? When the sun’s light appears, is it conjoined with darkness?”**

Here, *Vimalakīrti* asks *Śāriputra* whether the sun’s light conjoins with the darkness or not. This question initiates a common Buddhist metaphor: sun’s light represents wisdom; and darkness represents ignorance.

At this juncture, we can anticipate *Śāriputra*’s reply that darkness disappears when sun’s light emerges as following.

Then, [*Śāriputra*] answered, **“No. When the sun’s light appears, the darkness disappears.”**

Next, *Vimalakīrti* asked, **“Why does the sun come to *Jambudvīpa*?”**

Vimalakīrti posts a non-sophisticated question of why does the sun come to *Jambudvīpa*, a southern continent within a *Sumeru* mountain system.¹⁴ Generally, without the sun’s light and its energy, sentient beings on the earth could not survive and grow naturally. Obviously, most people recognize the appearance and benefit of the sun. Here, *Vimalakīrti* still inquires about the reason of the sun coming to the *Jambudvīpa* to serve implicitly as a metaphorical approach in the later passage to reveal his purpose of appearing in this impure land.

Next, *Śāriputra* replied: **“To illuminate it and eliminate the darkness.”**

This simple response can be answered by any person. The sun’s light comes to dispel the darkness. However, *Vimalakīrti* elaborates his question by using a metaphor as below.

“Bodhisattvas are like this. Even though they are born in impure Buddha lands in order to convert sentient beings, they are not therefore conjoined with the

¹⁴ John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2007), 132.

darkness of stupidity. They merely extinguish the darkness of the afflictions of sentient beings.”

Here, *Vimalakīrti* explicitly uses the metaphor of the sun’s light dispelling the darkness to explain why Bodhisattvas forsake their pure land to be reborn into the impure place to utilize their wisdom to disperse the ignorance’s darkness of sentient beings.

Vimalakīrti explains further that even the Bodhisattvas are born in the impure land in order to convert sentient beings, they are not conjoined with the darkness of stupidity. Namely, these Bodhisattvas do not indulge themselves in the darkness of stupidity, while they live in an impure place to save sentient beings. For example, despite living among some individuals who might have indulged in drinking, smoking, gambling, and other such a thing, Bodhisattvas do not become involved in such unwise addictions. Their only purpose is to extinguish the darkness of mental afflictions of sentient beings. Explicitly, they want to help impure people to reduce the darkness of emotional problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression, or to stay away from those addictions so that these people can enjoy life peacefully and happily. It is like a compassionate father, who is willing to jump down to a muddy puddle to pull his only son out it. Another example is the parable of a lost son in the *Lotus Sūtra* which describes a rich elder man using his expedient means to gain his son’s trust and confidence in order to pass heritage to his son. Yet, another example is *Kṣitigarbha* Bodhisattva who makes vows to rescue hell beings until the hells are empty.

In brief, we see two contradictory images: the Bodhisattva’s wisdom as bright as the sun’s light; and sentient beings’ ignorance and mental affliction as murky as the darkness. The mere reason for Bodhisattvas’ appearance in this impure land is to use

their wisdom to dispel the ignorance of sentient beings. The courage and compassion of Bodhisattvas are one of the most important principles in Mahāyāna tradition. The Bodhisattvas do not care much about their well-beings; they can put aside their own interest in order to bring the benefit for others even if their life may be in danger. Their motto is “Putting others’ benefit first, and keeping self-benefit later.” This attitude and approach of selflessness helps Bodhisattvas to accumulate sufficient blessing and merit to achieve Buddhahood.

In short, this passage depicts the astonishment and inspiration of *Śāriputra*, a representative of Hinayanists, toward the lay man *Vimalakīrti*, a representative of Mahayanists, who has forsaken his happiness in the pure land to be reborn in this impure planet for the sake of rescuing sentient beings as similar as shining the light to dispel the darkness. This passage speaks clearly the Mahāyāna ideal (which it championed so eloquently that it could be followed by householder or monk, each in his own way, without any necessity of opposing one another) of: Bodhisattvas postpone nirvana to enter the impure land in order to save sentient beings. Evidently, it shows the latter development of Mahāyāna zeal that suggested implicitly the Hinayanists’ inspiration for working on the *Bodhisattvayana* (Bodhisattva’s path). Lastly, we need to give credit for the translators, Paul and McRae, who have provided a simple, understandable, and enjoyable translation work in their stylistic writings for scholars, students, as well as the general public.

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