



Furnace Mountain

Newsletter

Spring 2009

Vimalakirti Is Sick

Dharma Talk by Zen Master Dae Gak
February Retreat 2009, Furnace Mountain

I want to read a little bit about the Vimalakirti Sutra to give you the flavor of the teachings of the Buddha's time. This Sutra is a mandala of your own mind. Each of us is all of the aspects of the mandala that is painted in this Sutra. What is interesting is that from the linear, human point of view we want to be number one. We want to be on top. Everybody wants to be the brains. It's like the eyes wanting to be the brain, or maybe the liver saying, "You know, I'd like to see. I wish I were the eyes." Or the toes saying, "I'm tired of being the one who is always walked. I want to be the one who knows, who understands." The system itself has no hierarchy. If one takes up the mandala of existence there genuinely is no hierarchy. It is just the unfolding of the blossoming of all of existence, the flowering forth. Hierarchy is something we add. Good and bad, well and unwell is something we add.

So, this sutra is the mandala of our own consciousness.

Thus have I heard at one time. The Lord Buddha was in residence in the garden of Amrapali, in the city of Vaisali, attended by a great gathering.

This is us, right? We are the Lord Buddha, in residence in the garden of Amrapali, which is just right now, where you are sitting right now, on your cushion. In the city of Vaisali, which is the temple in which we sit today. And you are attended by a great gathering which is your fellow sitters and all of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas that are floating around here that maybe you have been able to see or smell or taste or feel occasionally. It is quite a gathering.

Of bhikshus there were eight thousand, all saints. They were free from impurities and afflictions, and all had attained self-mastery. Their minds were



entirely liberated by perfect knowledge. They were calm and dignified, like royal elephants. They had accomplished their work, done what they had to do, cast off their burdens, attained their goals, and totally destroyed the bonds of existence. They all had attained the utmost perfection of every form of mind control.

This is an aspect of ourselves, isn't it? Your liver has done that. Your pancreas has done that. It is completely just doing its job. It has attained absolute pure and total unattached function. It doesn't care. It doesn't have an opinion.

Of bodhisattvas there were thirty-two thousand, great spiritual heroes who were universally acclaimed. They were dedicated through the penetrating activity of their great super-knowledges and were sustained by the grace of the Buddha. Guardians of the city of Dharma, they upheld the true doctrine, and their great teachings resounded like the lion's roar throughout the ten directions.

This too is us. If you look at your own consciousness carefully, you see that it's a jewel and that this lion's roar is a facet or a characteristic of the jewel shining forth.

Without having to be asked, they were the natural spiritual benefactors of all living beings.

And we have that in our heart as well.

They maintained unbroken the succession of the Three Jewels, conquering devils and foes and overwhelming all critics. Their mindfulness, intelligence, realization, meditation, incantation, and eloquence all were perfected. They had attained the intuitive tolerance of the ultimate incomprehensibility of all things. They turned the irreversible wheel of the Dharma. They were stamped with the insignia of signlessness.

These are all us, each of us. It is a description of an aspect that we each manifest. Also it is in our intention to be clear and to come together with one intention which is sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all. This intention is to just take up this practice with wholehearted effort, to get to the bottom of it. That intention is the manifestation or the brilliance or the illumination, the eloquence, the shining forth of all of these beings. That is the nature of existence itself; not the petty reality and opinions that we think that it is, of getting ours and not getting gypped and all of those things. Rather the very manifestation of one's moment is royalty and that manifestation of royalty is transcendent and blossoms forth in all its shining aspects in each one of us. That's our nature. It's ordinary, and it is astounding.

Vimalakirti supposedly lived at the time of the Buddha, he was a layman and he was married and he had children and servants and a house and they say that his enlightenment was as pure and as clear as the Buddha's himself. One day he was out walking in the ashram and he came upon Shariputra meditating. Vimalakirti came in and said, "Hey, what are you doing?"

And Shariputra said, "Shhhh. I'm meditating."

Vimalakirti said, "What are you crazy? You can't do that here. You can't find enlightenment here. How do you expect to find enlightenment outside of the activities of your daily life? How could you possibly believe that you could become enlightened avoiding the passions that are fundamentally human? How could you possibly think that you could come to realization without touching the dark side of your own shadow personality? How could you possibly think that you could awaken by only taking up half of what it is being human?"

Then Vimalakirti disappeared and Shariputra mumbled to himself, "What does he know? He doesn't have the discipline to be a monk. What could he possibly know about this?" But in his heart Shariputra knew that Vimalakirti was touching something that he himself had been turning away from in the hope that one could conquer passion by avoiding it, by repressing it, by not living in it.

Vimalakirti continued on his way and he came across Subhuti. Vimalakirti asked, "What are you doing?" Subhuti said, "Oh, I'm meditating."

Vimalakirti said, "You live here in this sheltered ashram. Do you think that you could possibly awaken in this protected state? Do you think you could possibly awaken without giving your heart away to all beings? Do you think it's possible to come to any kind of realization in the cocoon of your own practice?"

Vimalakirti went away and Subhuti said to himself, "What does he know? I've chosen to be a disciple of the Buddha and I know this path is the correct path. And what does he know, telling me these things, challenging me in that way? I know my heart. I know what's good for me. And I know if I go out into the world I'll just be consumed by it." But in his heart he knew that Vimalakirti was speaking something that was true.

Vimalakirti was in despair about these encounters with the monks and so he caused himself to be sick. He sent messengers to tell the Buddha that his best friend was sick and the Buddha hadn't even acknowledged it. The group of young attendants of Vimalakirti went to the Buddha. They came and they laid their parasols down, and the Buddha in his brilliance merged the parasols and turned them into a multicolored tent to house the meeting. And again, it is all a mandala of one's own mind, it's the brilliance and sparkle and meeting and interchanging of one's own consciousness. It is also the brilliance and meeting of our coming together with sincerity and love. It is the brilliance of what's really going on, if we could just stop and look.

The attendants said to the Buddha, "Vimalakirti is sick, shouldn't you send somebody to go visit him?" The Buddha turned to Shariputra and said, "You go and give Vimalakirti my love and wishes to get better." Shariputra said, "No way, I'm not going." Then he told the story of having met him. So the Buddha turns to Subhuti and says, "You, you go." And Subhuti says, "No way, this guy is too much for me."



On March 7th, Furnace Mountain welcomed Manoj and Annurita Kohli for a baby blessing ceremony for their six month old son, Amann. Amann received the dharma name Do Etsu (Joy Path) from Zen Master Dae Gak.

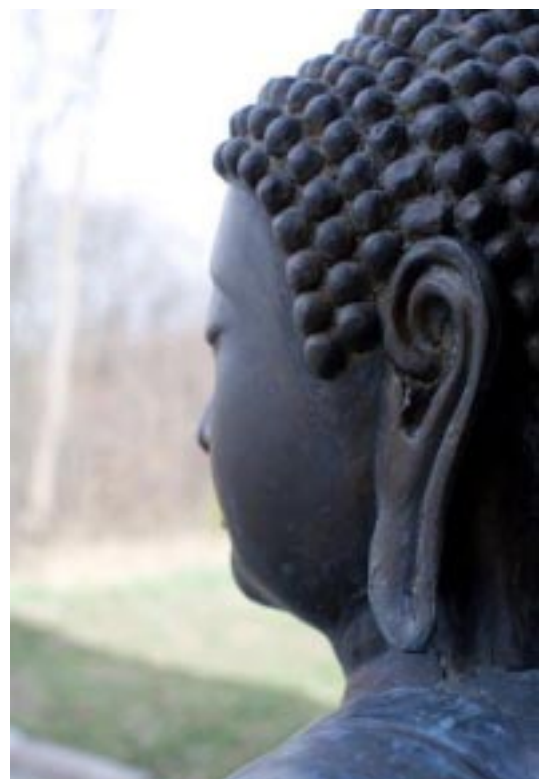
This is our consciousness as well; that we want to hold on to our delusions and in very, very clever and subtle ways we turn away from what we know is genuinely medicine, what will genuinely wake us up. We take the easy road, we take the shortcut, we take the known. Yet in our heart we know that we have to put ourselves totally in the fire. I can remember periods in my own practice where things would get really crazy and there was a complaint. And then it occurred to me that to take up a disruptive, deconstructing practice will inevitably make you crazy and turn your life upside down and things won't turn out to be the way you want, or thought, or hoped. And in that, the cornucopia or the piñata bursts open and the jewel of true existence shines forth. But it doesn't happen by following the old, or following the conventional, or following the known.

So, the Buddha asked all the monks and everyone says no. Finally he came to Manjusri and said, "Manjusri, you go." Manjusri said, "Well I don't want to," but eventually he agreed to go. And with him everybody else went. They all end up going and they meet Vimalakirti in his house. Vimalakirti is in bed. They come to attend him in his illness, and in that coming forward the house is transformed into this boundless castle of jewels. Not only do they come but all of the bodhisattvas, all of the mahasattvas, all of the Buddhas of all time, all of the arhats, everyone appears.

The teaching in that is that as we step forward into what we fear the most, all of the bodhisattvas come with us and help us. To step forward fearlessly, we bring with us everything we need. All of existence and all of the great saints come too. As we step forward into awakening we have everything we need and everything we could need. In the very stepping forward everything is transformed and there is a brilliance. We step forward into the illness, into the unwell, into the brokenness of our own heart. Stepping in to that, not looking away from that, not following our own shame, or following the criticism of others, not following the heartbreak of clinging and wanting, but to step into the heartbreak itself, transforms it and it is the great jewel of compassion. If we do this then Vimalakirti is cured.

After they offer their greetings and greetings from the Buddha, Vimalakirti teaches, and in the moment of the teaching they all fully and totally come to realization. That is our consciousness, that is our mind. The mandala of the sutra is the mandala of our particular mind. When we enter into that and awaken to who we are we come home to the place we have always been. We take our royal seat, ascend the throne of our own life and manifest who we truly are, not who the world has tried to shape us into or what our conditioning has pointed us toward, but who we truly are as humans, who we always have been. We are bodhisattvas, avatars of the Buddha himself; this is our only job.

Thank you for listening.



Upcoming Retreat Schedule

- April 9-12 Retreat at Furnace Mountain beginning 7:30pm Thursday, through noon Sunday. \$180
- April 24-26 Dialogue Retreat at Furnace Mountain beginning 7:30pm Friday, through noon Sunday \$120
- May 9-16 Week long retreat at Furnace Mountain. Beginning 7:30p.m. Saturday, through noon Saturday the 16th. \$420
- June 12-14 Introductory Retreat at Furnace Mountain, beginning 4:30pm Friday through noon Sunday. Led by Kosen Osho and Do Kwang Osho. \$120
- July 9-12 Retreat at Furnace Mountain beginning 7:30pm Thursday, through noon on Sunday. \$180

Future Planning: Furnace Mountain is considering offering a three-month retreat in January, February and March of 2010. Let us know if you would be interested in participating.



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The weekend of April 24-26, Furnace Mountain will host a dialogue retreat. Here are a few remarks about dialogue as encouragement for all to participate in this form of practice.

From J. Krishnamurti:

“A dialogue is a form of communication in which question and answer continues till a question is left without an answer. Thus the question is suspended between two persons involved in this answer and question. It is like a bud, which untouched blossoms... If the question is left totally untouched by thought, it then has its own answer because the questioner and answerer, as persons, have disappeared. This is a form of dialogue in which investigation reaches a certain point of intensity and depth, which then has a quality which thought can never reach. It is not a dialectical investigation of opinions, ideas, but rather exploration by two or many serious, good brains.”

From Zen Master Dae Gak:

Dialogue happens when those who are involved inquire and investigate for themselves without resorting to any systemized teaching, any external authority or any belief or dogma. When each participant is willing to put his/her energy, attention and affection into the dialogue as a process, transformation is possible. Dialogue rooted in affection and attention is vastly different from dialogue of the intellect. Affection and attention are outcomes of listening.

.... It is the process of pure and total presence that is vital. Questions and confusion are as valuable as seeming clarity and wisdom. The quality of our presence and awareness when quietly listening is as important to successful dialogue as is speaking and articulating clearly one's thoughts and experience.