

STUDY GUIDE

The Vimalakīrti Sutra

An explanatory summary, with special attention to emptiness, nonduality and the bodhisattva's life in the world

READING APPROACH The sutra is followed in narrative order, while recurring teachings are gathered into a practice-based synthesis. Thich Nhat Hanh's interpretations are identified as commentary rather than silently treated as words of the sutra.

Prepared from the reader's worked-up commentary and the complete 84000 translation

Purpose and method

This document is an explanatory summary rather than a chapter-by-chapter précis. It asks what each episode is doing, how its teaching fits the whole, and what practical correction it makes to a mistaken understanding of emptiness. The narrative sequence is retained because the drama itself teaches: respected disciples decline to visit Vimalakīrti; bodhisattvas recall how he overturned their assumptions; Mañjuśrī accepts the encounter; the discussion expands from a sickroom until whole universes fit within it.

A hybrid structure is therefore most useful. Part One follows the movement of the sutra. Part Two gathers its principal practices. This gives the future mind map a natural trunk and branches without flattening the sutra into a list of doctrines.

CENTRAL PURPOSE The sutra joins wisdom and compassionate activity. Because persons and phenomena lack fixed, independent nature, transformation is possible; because suffering is real conventionally, the bodhisattva does not use emptiness as an escape. Awakening is practised in relationship, society, conflict, illness and ordinary life.

Two recensions, two chapter arrangements

Thich Nhat Hanh comments chiefly on Kumārajīva's Chinese recension, arranged in 14 chapters. The 84000 translation follows the Tibetan recension, arranged in 12. The substance and narrative are closely related, but chapter numbers do not correspond. Comparison should therefore be made episode by episode. In particular, what is Chapter 4 in Thich Nhat Hanh's book (the four bodhisattvas' reasons for refusing the visit) forms part of the longer assembly of refusals in Chapter 3 of the 84000 translation.

Part One — The movement of the sutra

1. The Buddha-field: purity begins with the bodhisattva's mind and conduct

The sutra opens not in Vimalakīrti's house but before the Buddha, where the young Ratnākara asks about purifying a Buddha-field. The answer is decisive: the field of a bodhisattva is living beings. A pure land is not merely a remote reward or an aesthetically perfect realm; it is the world shaped by the bodhisattva's intention, virtues and ability to help beings awaken. Directness, bodhicitta, generosity, ethical discipline, patience, diligence, concentration, wisdom, the immeasurables and the means of gathering people all become causes of a Buddha-field.

When Śāriputra wonders why Śākyamuni's world appears so impure, the Buddha reveals its splendour. The episode does not sensibly mean that pain and injustice are imaginary, or that sufferers are personally to blame for their circumstances. It means that an impure, grasping mind cannot see things without distortion, and that a Buddha-field is also a field of practice: its quality is inseparable from the intentions, relationships and actions enacted within it.

Thich Nhat Hanh brings this strongly into the present. His emphasis is not flight from the Sahā world but the creation of a Pure Land here, amid suffering. His familiar image is the lotus that can grow only from compost and mud. This is a practical expansion of the sutra's Buddha-field teaching, not a verbatim phrase repeated throughout the text.

2. Vimalakīrti: the lay bodhisattva and the skill of entering every world

Vimalakīrti is introduced as a layman of Vaiśālī whose realization is extraordinarily advanced. He enters places that religious respectability might avoid (commercial, political and pleasure-seeking settings) yet does so without being captured by them. His freedom is shown not by withdrawal from society but by the ability to meet people where they are and use their circumstances as a way into the Dharma.

His illness is itself skilful means. Visitors come to inquire after him, and he uses the vulnerable body to teach impermanence and the need to cultivate the qualities of the Buddha-body or Dharma-body. Thich

Nhat Hanh accepts the warning against attachment to the body but softens any impression that the material body should be despised: the body is also the place through which mindfulness, compassion and awakening become visible.

IMPORTANT DISTINCTION Vimalakīrti is not offered simply as proof that an ordinary lay life requires no transformation. He is a highly accomplished bodhisattva who assumes a lay form as skilful means. The point is that awakening is not confined to monastic identity, not that every attachment of secular life is automatically liberating.

3. The hearer disciples: Vimalakīrti challenges restricted understandings of the Dharma

When Vimalakīrti pretends to become ill, the Buddha asks his ten foremost hearer disciples to visit him. Each declines because Vimalakīrti has previously confronted him and exposed a limitation in his understanding or practice.

These scenes are deliberately provocative. The disciples are corrected in the very areas for which they are famous: Śāriputra in wisdom and meditation, Maudgalyāyana in teaching, Mahā kāśyapa in ascetic practice, Subhūti in emptiness, Pūrṇa in teaching according to capacity, Mahā kātyāyana in doctrinal analysis, Anuruddha in divine vision, Upāli in monastic discipline, Rāhula in renunciation and Ānanda in learning and service to the Buddha.

Vimalakīrti is not saying that their practices are worthless. He is showing how a valid practice becomes restricted when it is separated from emptiness, compassion and skilful means. Meditation becomes withdrawal; language becomes dogma; generosity becomes a transaction; moral discipline becomes guilt; renunciation becomes spiritual profit; and even the Buddha can be reduced to the physical body that appears before us.

How to Read the Criticism

The sutra is staging a Mahāyāna argument, not giving reliable biographies of the historical disciples. Thich Nhat Hanh cautions us not to mistake these literary portraits for reliable descriptions of the historical disciples. The sutra uses these revered figures as dramatic foils so that the Mahāyāna understanding can be stated as forcefully as possible. The criticism may be unfair to the historical disciples, but the spiritual questions it raises apply to practitioners of every Buddhist tradition.

Śāriputra — Meditation had become withdrawal ^[wisdom]

What he was doing: Śāriputra was sitting quietly beneath a tree, practising meditation. The practice seems to have been associated with the attainment of cessation, a profound state of concentration in which perception and feeling temporarily cease. Vimalakīrti told him that this was not the complete meaning of meditation.

What Vimalakīrti found wrong: The problem was not that Śāriputra was sitting beneath a tree or entering a deep concentration. It was that meditation appeared to have become a special state produced by withdrawing from ordinary experience. Stillness was achieved by leaving sensory activity, thought, social involvement and the afflicted world behind.

This creates a division between meditation and life:

- When the practitioner is sitting quietly, there is concentration.
- When the practitioner returns to activity, concentration is left behind.
- The world is treated as the source of disturbance.
- Liberation is imagined as freedom obtained by temporarily excluding the conditions that disturb us.

Vimalakīrti considers this incomplete because it makes meditation dependent upon the absence of activity and difficulty. If peace exists only while disturbing conditions have been removed, it remains a fragile and conditioned peace.

The teaching Vimalakīrti is trying to convey: True concentration is not merely the cessation of experience. It is freedom from agitation and grasping while experience continues.

A practitioner should be able to walk, stand, sit, lie down, speak, work and meet other people without leaving meditative concentration. Forms may be seen, sounds heard and thoughts experienced, but the mind does not chase after them, reject them or construct a fixed self around them.

Thich Nhat Hanh therefore describes a person sitting at a busy crossroads without agitation as displaying a deeper concentration than someone whose peace depends entirely upon seclusion. The crossroads is both literal and symbolic: true practice must remain alive where demands, relationships and difficulties intersect.

This does not make formal sitting meditation unnecessary. Sitting develops stability, mindfulness and insight. The correction is that these qualities must not remain confined to the cushion. Meditation reaches maturity when the distinction between “meditation” and “the rest of my life” begins to dissolve.

The main lesson: Meditation is not an escape from the world but a way of being freely present within it. The bodhisattva does not have to choose between inner stillness and compassionate activity. Genuine stillness is carried into activity, and activity becomes an expression of meditation.

Maudgalyāyana: Words must point to the Dharma without becoming the Dharma [spiritual power]

What he was doing: Maudgalyāyana was giving a Dharma talk to a group of laypeople. He was using words, ideas and doctrinal explanations to teach them. Vimalakīrti told him that this was not the right way to teach the Dharma.

What Vimalakīrti found wrong: The problem was not simply that Maudgalyāyana was speaking. Vimalakīrti himself uses a great many words throughout the sutra. The problem was that Maudgalyāyana appeared to be presenting his concepts as though his words directly captured reality.

Words divide experience into apparently separate things: self, person, living being, lifespan, past, present, future, birth, death, coming and going. These distinctions are useful in communication, **but confusion begins when we assume that reality itself is naturally divided into the fixed entities named by our words.**

A Dharma teaching can therefore become an obstacle when the teacher or listener mistakes the verbal formulation for the reality to which it points. The teaching may be intellectually correct and yet fail to produce insight.

Thich Nhat Hanh distinguishes knowledge from understanding. Knowledge can assist understanding, but it can also harden into an accumulation of views. He compares it to water: while liquid, it flows; when frozen into ice, it obstructs the stream. Doctrinal learning becomes “ice” when it is possessed, defended and used to defeat others rather than to look deeply into experience.

The teaching Vimalakīrti is trying to convey: The Dharma as reality is not confined within words and concepts. A skilful teacher uses language while remaining aware that the language is provisional.

To say that **“the Dharma is not living being”** means that reality does not contain an independently existing entity corresponding to the label “living being.” A living being exists conventionally as an interdependent continuity of body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness, relationships and conditions. What cannot be found is a separate, permanent essence existing behind or within these processes.

Similarly, when the sutra says that “after and before are ended by the Dharma,” it is not claiming that chronological time disappears. It means that past, present and future do not exist as three independent portions of reality. **The past is present through its effects; the future arises from present conditions; and the present cannot be isolated as a motionless instant.**

The Dharma “ends” these divisions by ending our belief that they possess independent existence. It does not abolish the conventional persons and times to which the labels refer.

A good Dharma talk therefore performs two tasks at once:

1. It uses conventional words clearly enough to guide the listener.

2. It prevents both teacher and listener from becoming imprisoned by those words.

Vimalakīrti also says that the teacher must understand the listener's capacities, attachments and existing knowledge. [Teaching is not the delivery of a fixed package of information. It is a compassionate encounter intended to awaken understanding.](#)

The main lesson: Words are instruments of liberation only when they are not mistaken for reality. The teacher must use concepts without being used by them. The purpose of Dharma teaching is not merely to make people knowledgeable but to help them see.

Important nuance: Vimalakīrti is not saying that Dharma talks are impossible. His own criticism is delivered in words. The issue is whether language opens perception or closes it around a formula.

Mahā Kāśyapa — Equality must go beyond compassionate preference [ascetic discipline]

What Mahā Kāśyapa was doing: Mahākāśyapa was making his alms round in a poor neighbourhood. Known for his austere practice, he deliberately sought alms from poorer households so that their inhabitants could gain the merit of generosity. His intention was compassionate, but Vimalakīrti criticised the discrimination within it.

What Vimalakīrti found wrong: By seeking alms only from the poor, Kāśyapa had divided potential donors into two classes. The poor were regarded as especially deserving of the opportunity to give, while the wealthy were passed over. Although this preference was well intentioned, it did not embody the complete equality of phenomena. [Kāśyapa was still fixing people through categories such as rich and poor, fortunate and unfortunate, worthy and unworthy.](#)

The alms round could also be understood narrowly as an exchange, a transaction:

- A layperson gives food.
- A monk receives it.
- The donor acquires merit.
- The monk obtains nourishment.

This leaves intact three apparently separate realities: the giver, the receiver and the gift.

The teaching Vimalakīrti is trying to convey: The alms round is not merely a way for a monk to acquire food. It is itself a practice of mindfulness, equality and liberation. The monk walks without preference from house to house. While encountering forms, sounds, smells, tastes and people, the monk remains aware without attachment. [“Seeing as though blind” does not mean failing to see. It means seeing without being captured by the attractiveness or unattractiveness of what is seen. Hearing sounds “as echoes” likewise means hearing without treating the sound as a self-existing object that must be grasped or resisted.](#)

The practitioner also realises the emptiness of giver, receiver and gift. This does not mean that no one gives or receives anything. It means that none of the three exists independently:

- Without the donor, there is no gift.
- Without the receiver, there is no act of giving.
- Without the gift, neither person occupies the role of donor or receiver.

Each exists through the others. Giving is therefore not a transaction between two sealed selves but an interdependent event in which both participate.

Thich Nhat Hanh compares this understanding to a skilful gardener's relationship with compost. The gardener does not divide reality into a pure flower and utterly impure refuse. The refuse contains the conditions of the flower. In the same way, the practitioner does not establish rigid divisions between people, places and experiences before beginning to practise.

Important qualification: Vimalakīrti is not saying that poverty should be ignored or that compassionate action must treat unequal circumstances identically. Conventional differences matter, and the poor may require particular assistance. The criticism concerns the fixed identities and spiritual self-consciousness that can hide within compassionate preference.

The main lesson: True equality is not indifference. It is compassionate action without imprisoning people within the categories through which we try to help them. Generosity becomes complete when giver, receiver and gift are understood as mutually dependent.

Important nuance: Equality does not mean ignoring poverty or distributing resources blindly. Vimalakīrti is exposing the self-righteous distinction hidden inside Kāśyapa's preference. Compassion remains necessary, but without fixing people as 'the poor,' 'the rich,' 'the benefactor' or 'the holy recipient.'

Subhūti — Emptiness had remained too narrow and oppositional [emptiness]

What he was doing: Subhūti, renowned for his understanding of emptiness, came to Vimalakīrti's house on his alms round. Vimalakīrti filled his bowl but withheld it while challenging Subhūti's understanding of equality, affliction and liberation.

What Vimalakīrti found wrong: Subhūti still appeared to divide experience into fixed opposites: affliction and awakening, bondage and liberation, wrongdoing and purity, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa. On this understanding, attachment, hatred, ignorance, sensual craving, anger and confusion are impurities to be rejected or escaped before liberation can be attained.

Vimalakīrti's criticism is that this gives afflictions an independent and unchanging nature. It also places liberation somewhere outside our present experience, as though it were a separate realm that could be reached only after everything impure had been removed.

The corrected understanding: Afflictive thoughts should neither be rejected with disgust nor accepted as one's identity. The practitioner does not say, "These thoughts are intrinsically evil and must be driven away," but neither says, "These thoughts are myself and must be obeyed." They are recognised as conditioned mental formations: they arise through causes, remain only while supported by conditions, and can therefore be understood and transformed.

This is why Vimalakīrti says that infatuation and ignorance are not entirely separate from liberation. It does not mean that ignorance is already wisdom or that attachment has the same effects as freedom. It means that affliction and liberation are not two independently existing substances. Liberation arises through understanding the very afflictions that previously produced bondage. Without the experience of attachment, anger and confusion, there would be nothing to understand or transform and no path by which wisdom and compassion could develop.

Thich Nhat Hanh expresses this through the images of flowers and refuse. Refuse is not a flower, but it can become the compost from which a flower grows; the flower eventually becomes refuse again. In the same way, affliction is not awakening, but awakening develops through looking deeply into affliction and transforming it. We therefore learn to see "the awakening in the afflictions" and "the afflictions in the awakening." The two are conventionally distinguishable but cannot be separated into independent realities.

The sheet of paper provides another illustration. Paper is made entirely from things that are not paper: trees, soil, rain, clouds, sunlight and human labour. None of these is paper by itself, yet without them paper could not exist. Similarly, what we call "right" arises in dependence upon conditions that are not themselves "right." Wisdom develops through encountering ignorance; patience develops in relation to anger and difficulty; compassion develops in response to suffering. The wholesome cannot be understood as a self-existing purity completely detached from the unwholesome conditions it transforms.

"In the five crimes there is the seed of liberation": Vimalakīrti applies this reasoning even to the five crimes of immediate retribution: killing one's mother, killing one's father, killing an arhat, maliciously causing a Buddha to bleed, and splitting the saṅgha. He is not minimising these actions or denying their terrible karmic consequences. Nor is he suggesting that they should be committed. He is denying that either the action or the person who commits it possesses an eternally fixed nature.

Even the gravest wrongdoing remains dependently arisen and empty. Consequently, it can become the occasion for remorse, moral responsibility, restraint and profound transformation. If wrongdoing possessed an intrinsic nature, no offender could ever change and no liberation would be possible. Its emptiness is precisely what leaves open the possibility of awakening.

“In bondage there is liberation, and in liberation there is bondage”: Bondage contains the possibility of liberation because bondage is not permanent or self-existing. When its causes are understood and transformed, freedom can emerge from within it.

Conversely, liberation contains the possibility of bondage whenever we grasp it as “my liberation,” turn it into a fixed identity, or use it to separate ourselves from those who still suffer. Attachment to purity, spiritual achievement or nirvāṇa becomes another form of bondage. Vimalakīrti is therefore not making bondage and liberation identical. He is showing that neither has an independent nature and that each can change into the other according to causes and conditions.

“You do not see the Four Noble Truths, but you are not ignorant of them”: To “not see” the Four Noble Truths means not treating suffering, its origin, its cessation and the path as four self-existing realities that can be grasped conceptually. Under ultimate analysis, no independently existing suffering, cause, cessation or path can be found.

Yet the practitioner is not ignorant of the Four Noble Truths as an ordinary person may be. Conventionally, suffering is experienced, it arises through causes, its causes can cease, and a path of practice leads toward that cessation. The truths are understood and practised without being reified.

Subhūti’s mistake, as the sutra presents it, was therefore not that he knew nothing about emptiness. His emptiness remained too closely associated with escaping affliction and reaching a liberation separate from it. Vimalakīrti offers a more thoroughly nondual understanding: do not reject afflictions, do not identify with them, and do not deny the harm they cause. Recognise their emptiness and transform them. The good practitioner, like the good gardener, wastes nothing.

Important nuance: This is not permission to commit the five gravest actions or to call bondage liberation. Harm still produces suffering. The point is that wrongdoing is not an eternal substance: [because it is conditioned and empty, remorse, restraint and transformation are possible](#). Thich Nhat Hanh also regards the sutra’s portrayal of the historical Subhūti as implausibly belittling.

Pūrṇa: Teach the person, not merely the teaching you know [teaching]

What Pūrṇa was doing: Pūrṇa, renowned as the Buddha’s foremost teacher of the Dharma, was instructing a group of newly ordained monks. He appears to have been giving them teachings directed toward the hearer’s goal of personal liberation. Vimalakīrti accused him of giving the wrong medicine to the wrong people.

What Vimalakīrti found wrong: Pūrṇa had begun teaching without first understanding the monks’ capacities, aspirations and previously cultivated spiritual roots. His teaching may have been valid in itself. The problem was that it was too restricted for these particular listeners. Their minds were capable of receiving the expansive bodhisattva teaching, but Pūrṇa was directing them toward a narrower goal.

Vimalakīrti uses deliberately severe images:

- Do not put spoiled food into a precious bowl.
- Do not mistake beryl for ordinary glass.
- Do not place the great ocean in a buffalo’s footprint.
- Do not reduce the light of the sun to the light of a glow-worm.
- Do not give medicine to a healthy cow and make it lame.

The criticism is not merely that Pūrṇa taught the “wrong school.” It is that he imposed his understanding upon the listeners instead of discovering what would enable their deepest aspiration to emerge.

The teaching Vimalakīrti is trying to convey: Teaching must begin with listening and understanding. The skilful teacher asks:

- What is this person genuinely seeking?
- What understanding has already developed?
- What fears or attachments obstruct further growth?
- What teaching can this person receive now?
- Will this teaching enlarge or diminish the person’s aspiration?

Vimalakīrti enters meditation and enables the monks to remember that in previous lives they had already generated bodhicitta before many Buddhas. Their deepest aspiration was not merely to escape their own suffering but to attain awakening for the benefit of all beings. Once they remember this, Vimalakīrti teaches them accordingly. Thich Nhat Hanh regards this as a lesson in spiritual psychology. A teacher who does not understand the listener may unintentionally injure that person. A limited teaching can persuade someone with a vast aspiration to settle for less than they are capable of realising.

Important qualification: This does not mean that the most philosophically advanced teaching should always be given. An advanced doctrine offered without regard for readiness can also confuse or discourage. Skilful means is neither routinely simplifying the Dharma nor routinely making it more elevated. It is finding the teaching appropriate to these beings under these conditions.

The main lesson: A Dharma teacher does not simply repeat the teaching he knows best. He discerns the potential of the listener and offers the teaching that allows that potential to unfold. Compassionate teaching is responsive rather than standardised.

Mahā Kātyāyana: Doctrinal explanations must not turn dependent processes into solid things [analysis]

What Mahā Kātyāyana was doing: After the Buddha had taught a group of monks, Mahā Kātyāyana was explaining five central teachings: **impermanence, suffering, emptiness, no-self and nirvāṇa**.

Kātyāyana was famous for his ability to analyse and explain the Buddha's concise teachings. Nevertheless, Vimalakīrti told him not to explain the Dharma with a mind still caught in birth and death.

What Vimalakīrti found wrong: Kātyāyana appeared to be explaining the teachings solely at the conventional level:

- Impermanence meant that things are born, change and are destroyed.
- Suffering was treated as a fixed characteristic of the aggregates.
- Emptiness meant that something truly existing was later found to be absent.
- No-self was treated as the opposite of a possibly existing self.
- Nirvāṇa was imagined as a future cessation reached when birth and death had been left behind.

These explanations are not simply false. At the conventional level, phenomena arise and cease, conditioned existence is unsatisfactory, and the path leads to the cessation of suffering. **The limitation is that the explanation leaves intact the idea of independently existing things that undergo these changes. If something first existed through its own nature and was later destroyed, its cessation would amount to annihilation. That is not emptiness or dependent arising.**

The teaching Vimalakīrti is trying to convey: To understand impermanence deeply, we must see that no separate, self-existing entity is born or destroyed.

A wave conventionally arises and subsides. Yet the wave is not an independent substance added to the water at birth and removed at death. It is water taking a temporary form through wind, movement and other conditions. The wave changes, but nothing possessing an isolated “wave nature” travels from nonexistence into existence and then into annihilation.

In the same way:

- **Impermanence** means continuous dependent transformation, not the destruction of an independently existing thing.
- **Suffering** is inseparable from grasping the aggregates as “I” and “mine.” Because the aggregates are empty, suffering is not an eternal essence.
- **Emptiness** means that phenomena never possessed separate self-existence; it does not mean that a truly existing thing has been reduced to nothing.
- **No-self** is not a metaphysical object standing opposite another object called “self.” It releases the mistaken way in which self is imagined.
- **Nirvāṇa** is not a separate place or substance waiting in the future. It is the cessation of grasping and the realisation of the unborn and undying nature of phenomena.

Thich Nhat Hanh expresses this by saying that nirvāṇa is available in the present. This does not mean that an unawakened person is already liberated and needs no practice. It means that nirvāṇa is not created by

destroying reality. It is realised when the empty, dependent nature of reality is seen without grasping.

The main lesson: Doctrinal formulas are useful conventional teachings, but they must lead beyond themselves. Impermanence, suffering, emptiness, no-self and nirvāṇa should reveal dependent reality, not become five new things for the mind to grasp.

Anuruddha — Spiritual powers are not the same as liberating vision [divine vision]

What Anuruddha was doing: Anuruddha was walking in meditation when Brahmā gods approached and asked how far he could see with his divine eye. He replied that he could see an immense three-thousand-fold world-system as clearly as a mango held in his hand.

Vimalakīrti then asked whether this divine eye was conditioned or unconditioned.

What Vimalakīrti found wrong: Anuruddha had described his vision as a personal power with a measurable range: “My divine eye can see this far.” Vimalakīrti’s question places him in a dilemma:

- If the divine eye is conditioned (dependent upon training, mental states, perceptual signs and objects) then it is a conditioned psychic faculty. It may be remarkable, but it is not fundamentally different from extraordinary powers cultivated by non-Buddhists.
- If the divine eye is unconditioned, it cannot operate through a division between a seer and an independently existing object seen. Nothing unconditioned possesses an ordinary perceptual range.

The criticism is directed not so much at the claimed ability as at the spiritual significance Anuruddha gives it. A power remains conditioned when it depends upon causes and experienced as something “I possess.”

The teaching Vimalakīrti is trying to convey: Extraordinary perception is not necessarily liberating insight. A person might see distant worlds and remain bound by self, pride and dualistic perception.

Vimalakīrti says that the Buddha possesses the true divine eye because the Buddha abides in concentration and sees the Buddha-fields without having to enter a special state of clairvoyance. The Buddha’s vision is unobstructed because it is not organised around a fixed observer standing apart from fixed objects. The deeper “divine eye” is therefore wisdom: seeing phenomena as they are, without possession, pride or attachment to signs.

This also continues the lesson given to Śāriputra. Just as true meditation should not be confined to a special state, true vision should not be confined to a special faculty that is switched on and off.

The main lesson: Spiritual power is not proof of liberation. The decisive question is not how far one can see, but whether seeing occurs without a fixed seer, without attachment and without turning the attainment into “my power.”

Upāli — Moral responsibility must not become a permanent identity of guilt [monastic discipline]

What Upāli was doing: Two monks who had broken their vows approached Upāli, the disciple foremost in knowledge of monastic discipline. They asked him to explain their offences and tell them how to confess and purify them. Upāli’s detailed instruction was increasing their fear, guilt and confusion. Vimalakīrti told him not to trouble the monks further.

What Vimalakīrti found wrong: Upāli appeared to be treating the offence as a fixed impurity attached to the offenders. In trying to establish precisely what they had done and how it should be removed, he risked reinforcing the belief that the monks had become inherently defiled people.

Vimalakīrti asks where the offence can be found:

- Is it inside the offender?
- Is it outside?
- Is it somewhere between the two?
- Is it an unchanging substance within the mind?

No independent offence can be located. The action arose through intention, circumstances, mental states, behaviour and consequences. The person who committed it likewise exists as a changing, dependent continuity rather than as a permanent offender.

The danger is that appropriate remorse may harden into self-condemnation: “I did something harmful” becomes “I am essentially and permanently corrupt.”

The teaching Vimalakīrti is trying to convey: Purity and impurity are not intrinsic qualities of a person. They describe conditioned states of mind and conduct. When the mind is governed by grasping, confusion and harmful intention, it is called impure. When mindfulness, understanding and non-attachment are present, it is called pure. Neither condition is permanent. Because the mind and its actions are empty of fixed nature, transformation is possible. This insight does not abolish moral responsibility. On the contrary, it makes genuine ethical change possible:

1. The harmful action is acknowledged honestly.
2. Its causes and effects are understood.
3. Appropriate confession, restraint, regret and reparation occur.
4. The conditions likely to reproduce the action are changed.
5. The person is not imprisoned forever within the identity of an offender.

If an offence possessed intrinsic existence, it could never be purified. If the offender possessed an intrinsically defiled nature, practice would be pointless. Thich Nhat Hanh's concern is that moral teaching should heal rather than wound. Guilt that produces mindfulness, responsibility and renewed ethical conduct can be useful. Guilt that simply strengthens self-hatred becomes another affliction.

Important qualification: "The mind is originally pure" must not be used to deny wrongdoing. The ultimate absence of a fixed offence does not remove its conventional consequences. Emptiness means that the offence is dependent and transformable, not that it never happened.

The main lesson: Ethical discipline should produce responsibility and freedom, not a permanent identity of guilt. A person is accountable for an action without being reducible to that action.

Rāhula — Renunciation is not a means of acquiring spiritual profit [renunciation]

What Rāhula was doing: A group of young Licchavis asked Rāhula about the benefits and merit of leaving home to become a monk. Rāhula began explaining the advantages of monastic life.

Vimalakīrti interrupted and told him not to speak of renunciation in terms of advantage and merit.

What Vimalakīrti found wrong: Renunciation means letting go. If a person renounces ordinary life in order to acquire merit, status, security, admiration or a superior spiritual identity, the underlying structure of attachment remains intact. The objects have changed, but the **acquisitive** self has survived:

- Previously, "I" wanted wealth or pleasure.
- Now, "I" want merit and spiritual distinction.
- Previously, "I" identified as a householder.
- Now, "I" identify as a superior renunciant.

Renunciation becomes another possession: "my monastic life," "my merit," "my purity" and "my progress." Vimalakīrti is not denying that monastic life has practical benefits. He is speaking from the ultimate perspective, in which genuine letting go cannot be reduced to a transaction performed for personal gain.

The teaching Vimalakīrti is trying to convey: True "leaving home" means leaving the mental home constructed from fixed views, attachments and self-identification. A person has truly left home when he or she:

- abandons rigid speculative views;
- is no longer governed by the afflictions;
- gathers and steadies the senses;
- does not construct a superior identity from the practice;
- generates bodhicitta and lives for the awakening of all beings.

The young men say that they would like to ordain but have not received their parents' permission. Vimalakīrti tells them that they can generate the aspiration to complete awakening immediately. Bodhicitta is the essential inner renunciation: the relinquishment of a life organised solely around one's own advantage.

Formal ordination remains a profound and valuable path. But a change of clothing, residence and social status is not sufficient if the mind continues to cling. Conversely, a layperson can begin practising the essence of renunciation through non-attachment and bodhicitta.

Main lesson: The purpose of renunciation is not to enrich the spiritual self but release it. Monastic life embodies renunciation when its discipline serves freedom & compassion rather than status, merit or identity.

Ānanda: The Buddha cannot be reduced either to an ordinary body or to a disembodied absolute

[learning and attendance upon the Buddha]

What Ānanda was doing: The Buddha had become physically unwell and was unable to take solid food. He asked Ānanda to obtain some milk. While Ānanda was standing outside a house with his bowl, Vimalakīrti asked what he was doing. When Ānanda explained that the Buddha was ill, Vimalakīrti rebuked him sharply. He said that the Buddha's body was as indestructible as diamond and that Ānanda should not spread the humiliating claim that the Buddha was sick.

What Vimalakīrti found wrong: Ānanda appeared to be identifying the Buddha entirely with the conditioned physical body. If the Buddha is nothing more than the visible body that becomes hungry, ill, old and eventually dies, Buddhahood is reduced to the biography of one individual.

Vimalakīrti draws attention to the Dharma-body: the awakened truth, wisdom and compassionate activity embodied by the Buddha but not exhausted by his physical form.

The historical body manifests the Buddha; it does not contain or limit the whole reality of Buddhahood.

Why Vimalakīrti's first correction is itself incomplete: Ānanda becomes confused because he knows that the Buddha really did ask him to obtain milk. A heavenly voice then tells him that, although the ultimate body of a Buddha is beyond ordinary affliction, the Buddha appears to become sick as a skilful means for helping beings. Ānanda should therefore continue collecting the milk.

This intervention is essential. Without it, Vimalakīrti's rebuke could encourage the opposite error: denying the reality of the Buddha's embodied life. The episode therefore corrects two extremes:

- **Reducing the Buddha to the physical body:** Buddhahood is then merely one conditioned individual subject to illness and death.
- **Denying the Buddha's physical vulnerability:** Ultimate truth is then used to pretend that the embodied Buddha does not become tired, hungry, ill or old and requires no care.

The teaching Vimalakīrti is trying to convey: The two truths must be held together. Conventionally, the Buddha has a human body. The body needs food, becomes ill and receives care. Ānanda is doing nothing wrong by seeking milk; he is faithfully caring for his teacher.

Ultimately, the Buddha cannot be identified solely with the five aggregates. The Buddha is known through the Dharma and through awakened qualities that are not destroyed when the physical body changes.

The Buddha's illness can also perform compassionate work. By appearing within human vulnerability, the Buddha becomes accessible to beings who suffer through their bodies. Illness is not evidence that the Dharma has failed. It becomes another circumstance through which the Dharma is manifested.

Thich Nhat Hanh is particularly useful here because he resists contempt for the body. The Dharma-body does not require us to reject the physical body. Wisdom and compassion become visible through embodied acts: eating, resting, becoming ill, receiving care and caring for others.

The main lesson: The Buddha is neither merely a vulnerable physical organism nor an abstract reality untouched by human life. The physical body and the Dharma-body are distinguishable but not opposed. Care for the conventional body continues, while insight prevents us from reducing Buddhahood to that body.

What the hearer-disciple encounters teach as a whole

Vimalakīrti does not abolish the practices represented by the disciples. He asks that **each practice be released from the limitation created by grasping**:

- Śāriputra should meditate without making meditation a withdrawal from life.
- Maudgalyāyana should speak without mistaking words for reality.
- Mahākāśyapa should practise compassionate generosity without fixing giver, receiver or social identity.
- Subhūti should realise emptiness without placing liberation outside affliction.
- Pūrṇa should teach the person before him rather than merely repeat the teaching he knows.
- Mahā Kātyāyana should explain doctrine without turning dependent processes into solid things.
- Anuruddha should see without possessing vision as a personal spiritual power.
- Upāli should uphold moral responsibility without creating an incurably guilty self.
- Rāhula should renounce without acquiring a new spiritual identity.

- Ānanda should care for the Buddha's body without reducing Buddhahood to that body.

The common problem is not practice but reification. A method, distinction or teaching that is conventionally useful is treated as an absolute reality. Vimalakīrti removes this fixation without discarding the practice itself.

The result is a more expansive understanding of the Dharma. Meditation enters daily activity; speech points beyond concepts; morality permits rehabilitation; renunciation becomes freedom from possessiveness; and emptiness makes compassionate transformation possible.

THE COMMON CORRECTION

Use every distinction without making it absolute. Meditate without withdrawing from life; speak without clinging to words; give without fixing giver and receiver; recognize wrongdoing without creating an incurably guilty self; renounce without acquiring a spiritual identity; and care for the conventional body without reducing awakening to it. The practices remain—the grasping is removed.

Summary

The hearer-disciple chapter examines ten ways in which Buddhist practice can become narrower than the liberation it is intended to serve. Vimalakīrti challenges meditation based on withdrawal, teaching caught in words, generosity divided by preference, emptiness separated from affliction, instruction insensitive to the listener, doctrines confined to conventional appearances, spiritual powers turned into possessions, discipline that intensifies guilt, renunciation pursued for personal advantage and a view of the Buddha confined to his physical body.

His answer is not to reject these practices but to deepen them through emptiness, nonduality, compassion and skilful means. Conventional distinctions and practices remain necessary, but they are no longer treated as fixed or independent. In this way, the Dharma ceases to be a collection of spiritual objects and becomes a way of living freely and compassionately within the world.

What Vimalakīrti brings to these encounters is an unwavering insistence that conventional understanding must be deepened by insight into ultimate truth. With penetrating discernment, he uncovers the subtle attachments and fixed distinctions that limit each hearer's practice. He does not discard their practices or deny their conventional value; he reveals how they become fully liberating when informed by emptiness, nonduality and compassion.

4. The four bodhisattvas: awakening brought into understanding and action

Having challenged the hearer disciples, Vimalakīrti now challenges four bodhisattvas. The point is important: adopting the Mahāyāna aspiration does not automatically free a practitioner from restricted understanding. Even Buddhahood, spiritual practice, purity and generosity can be understood too narrowly.

However, this chapter does more than expose attachment. Its four encounters progressively explain what awakening is and how it becomes a way of living:

- Maitreya's encounter concerns the **nature** of awakening.
- Prabhāvyūha's concerns the **place and activity** of awakening.
- Jagatindhara's concerns the **happiness and sharing** of awakening.
- Sudatta's concerns the **offering of a life directed toward** awakening.

Vimalakīrti repeatedly moves beyond conventional descriptions to their ultimate meaning. Yet the outcome is not the abandonment of practice. Insight into the ultimate transforms the way practice is carried out in the conventional world.

Maitreya — Awakening is not an object to be acquired in the future

What Maitreya was doing

Maitreya was teaching gods in the Tuṣṭita heaven about the stage of non-regression: the stage from which a bodhisattva no longer turns back from complete awakening. Maitreya himself had received the

prediction that he would become a Buddha after one more birth.

Vimalakīrti asks what this predicted birth could mean. Does it belong to the past, present or future?

What Vimalakīrti challenges

The past has already passed; the future has not arrived; and the present does not remain still long enough to be grasped. If we imagine a solid person moving through solid periods of time toward a solid possession called enlightenment, we have misunderstood both the person and enlightenment.

This goes deeper than spiritual pride or the thought “my future Buddhahood.” [Vimalakīrti is questioning the whole picture of awakening as something independently existing that is currently absent and will later be added to a person.](#)

Conventionally, Maitreya practises, progresses and receives a prediction. [Ultimately, neither the person, the time nor the attainment can be found as an independent reality.](#)

Suchness is not something that begins when we awaken

“Suchness” means the reality of things as they are, free from the fixed identities projected onto them. Suchness does not first come into existence when a person becomes enlightened. Thich Nhat Hanh explains this through the wave and water. A wave may appear, rise, fall and disappear, but it does not have to become water at some future date. It is already water, even while appearing as a particular wave. Similarly, awakening does not manufacture the true nature of phenomena. It realises what has not been understood.

This does not mean that ignorance and awakening are conventionally identical. The wave’s being water illustrates the distinction between its nature and its recognition of that nature. A person may be empty of separate existence while remaining deeply caught in the belief in a separate self.

Practice is necessary because misunderstanding and affliction remain: not because practice must create an ultimate nature that was previously missing.

Awakening is not a private reality

Vimalakīrti also says that Maitreya’s suchness is not different from that of all living beings. There is no intrinsically superior “Buddha substance” belonging to Maitreya and an intrinsically inferior substance belonging to everyone else. The sutra expresses this radically: if awakening is predicted on the basis of suchness, the same reasoning extends to all beings.

This is not a conventional prediction that every being will suddenly become enlightened at the same moment as Maitreya. It removes the ultimate separation between the enlightened one and those who remain unenlightened. Differences in realization remain, but they do not establish different intrinsic natures.

What bodhi actually means

Vimalakīrti tells Maitreya to teach the gods in a way that frees them from attachment to the very idea of bodhi: awakening.

Thich Nhat Hanh spends considerable time explaining the descriptions that follow:

- **Bodhi is beyond grasping:** it cannot be seized by the body or possessed by the conceptual mind as an object.
- **Bodhi is the cessation of fixed views:** ideas such as birth and death, being and nonbeing, gain and loss, no longer imprison understanding.
- **Bodhi is letting go:** attachment to attainment itself is relinquished.
- **Bodhi is unobstructed:** anxious calculation about spiritual success no longer disturbs the mind.
- **Bodhi is peace:** conceptual conflict and compulsive discrimination have subsided.
- **Bodhi is nondual:** there is no fixed subject standing apart from an independently existing enlightenment.

When Thich Nhat Hanh says that bodhi does not increase from seventy per cent to eighty per cent, his point is not that practice cannot deepen. Mindfulness, concentration and insight do develop. But awakening’s ultimate nature is not a substance accumulated in quantities.

Likewise, “bodhi cannot be practised” must not be read as advice to stop practising. It means that ultimate reality is not a product manufactured by effort. Practice loosens the ignorance and grasping that prevent its realisation.

The main lesson

Do not practise in order to add a possession called enlightenment to an imagined permanent self. Practise to release the grasping that obscures reality: including grasping at the path and its result.

Maitreya’s encounter therefore asks us to distinguish cultivating the conditions for awakening from manufacturing awakening as a thing.

Prabhāvyūha (Radiance) — The seat of awakening is enacted, not merely visited

What happens

The young Prabhāvyūha is leaving Vaiśālī when he meets Vimalakīrti entering the city. He asks where Vimalakīrti has come from. Vimalakīrti replies that he has come from the seat of awakening. Prabhāvyūha then asks what this means. Vimalakīrti’s answer transforms a question about location into a teaching about the whole bodhisattva life.

What Vimalakīrti expands

The seat of awakening, or bodhimaṇḍa, ordinarily suggests the place where a Buddha realises enlightenment. But if awakening is associated only with a particular sacred location, we may assume that ordinary life takes place somewhere else. Vimalakīrti does not reject sacred places. He explains what makes any place a seat of awakening: the qualities of mind and conduct expressed there.

Unlike some of the hearer encounters, the text does not explicitly accuse Prabhāvyūha of a serious error. His question becomes an opportunity to unfold a much greater understanding.

The qualities of practice are themselves the seat

Vimalakīrti begins with very concrete qualities:

- An upright, honest mind is the seat of awakening because it is free from deception.
- Deep resolve and sustained effort are the seat because practice is carried through rather than merely admired.
- Bodhicitta is the seat because awakening is directed toward the benefit of beings.
- Generosity is the seat when it expects no reward.
- Ethical conduct is the seat when commitments are fulfilled.
- Patience is the seat when anger does not govern our response to others.
- Meditation is the seat when the mind becomes steady and capable.
- Wisdom is the seat when reality is seen directly.

The list also includes loving-kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, learning, the aids to awakening and dependent arising. These are not merely preparations undertaken somewhere other than the “real” place of awakening. They are ways in which that place is established. A room does not become a place of practice simply because it contains a shrine. It becomes one through the honesty, mindfulness, understanding and compassion enacted there.

Learning must become lived understanding

The inclusion of learning matters. Vimalakīrti is not rejecting study or doctrinal knowledge. In the 84000 translation, learning is connected with putting its essence into practice.

The question is therefore not how much Dharma we have collected, but whether what we have learned changes the way we see and act.

Similarly, the means of gathering beings: (generosity, kind speech, beneficial action and cooperation) make relationship itself a place of awakening.

Affliction and the ordinary world are not excluded

Thich Nhat Hanh gives particular emphasis to the startling extension of the teaching: afflictions, sense experience, the three realms and Māra can also be the seat of awakening. This does not mean that anger,

desire or confusion automatically constitute enlightened practice. They become occasions for awakening when their nature is understood and our response to them is transformed.

Anger can become the place where we learn patience and investigate wounded self-grasping. Desire can become the place where we understand dependence and dissatisfaction. A difficult encounter can become the place where compassion ceases to be an abstract ideal.

The important distinction is between being governed by an affliction and practising with an affliction. We therefore need not postpone practice until our surroundings are quiet, our emotions agreeable and other people cooperative.

Every action can come from the seat of awakening

The passage culminates in the teaching that, when a bodhisattva embodies the perfections and develops living beings, even lifting or putting down a foot comes from the seat of awakening.

Thich Nhat Hanh draws together the practices through their common purpose. Ordinary actions are no longer scattered activities unrelated to enlightenment. They are gathered into one direction: understanding reality and relieving suffering.

The main lesson

The seat of awakening is not merely somewhere we go. It is established through how we think, speak and act. No circumstance is automatically excluded, but it becomes a Dharma door through the quality of our practice: not simply because we declare everything sacred.

Jagatindhara: Recognise deception, discover Dharma happiness & become an inexhaustible lamp

What Jagatindhara was doing

Jagatindhara was in his dwelling when Māra arrived disguised as Indra, accompanied by twelve thousand goddesses and music. Mistaking Māra for a benevolent god, Jagatindhara offered sound advice about impermanence and the limitations of sensual pleasure. When Māra offered him the goddesses as servants, he refused because such an offering was inappropriate for a religious practitioner.

Vimalakīrti arrived and immediately recognised Māra.

What Vimalakīrti reveals

Jagatindhara's advice was not wrong, nor was his refusal to accept the offering. What was missing was penetrating discernment: he did not recognise what was actually taking place. This adds an important point. The episode is not simply about excessive fear of temptation. It distinguishes knowing appropriate religious responses from seeing through the appearances of a particular situation.

Māra does not always appear openly as something destructive. Delusion can present itself as flattery, generosity, opportunity, spiritual reassurance or apparent goodwill.

Thich Nhat Hanh's practical interpretation: recognise Māra

Thich Nhat Hanh brings Māra into the workings of the mind. A thought may appear reasonable while being driven by pride, fear, craving or resentment. Mindfulness recognises what is happening: "This is anger"; "This is the desire to be admired"; "This apparent generosity is seeking control." Such recognition interrupts the thought's power to pass itself off as unquestionable truth.

When Thich Nhat Hanh says that recognising wrong thinking makes it cease, the practical emphasis is on this interruption of unconscious identification. It should not be turned into a demand that every deeply rooted habit must vanish permanently after one moment of recognition. Repeated mindfulness and cultivation may still be needed.

Vimalakīrti transforms the encounter rather than merely refusing it

Vimalakīrti accepts the goddesses within the story's ancient gift-giving framework, then addresses them as people capable of awakening. He encourages them to generate bodhicitta and discover the happiness of the Dharma. Although the narrative begins by treating them as part of Māra's offering, its teaching moves toward recognising them as practitioners who can themselves benefit others.

Vimalakīrti therefore sees more than a threat to his own purity. He sees beings who can be helped.

What is Dharma happiness?

This is one of the chapter's most important positive teachings.

The alternative to sensual attachment is not a joyless life. It is a different basis for happiness: one that develops through understanding, generosity and freedom rather than the repeated satisfaction of craving.

Vimalakīrti describes happiness in:

- confidence in the Buddha, receptivity to the Dharma and service to the saṅgha;
- generosity and actions that benefit living beings;
- ethical conduct and freedom from the agitation caused by harmful behaviour;
- patience rather than resentment;
- mindfulness, concentration and wisdom;
- cultivating wholesome qualities and weakening afflictions;
- preserving bodhicitta;
- hearing profound teachings without being frightened by them;
- learning skilful means and helping others awaken.

The 84000 translation also includes freedom from resentment toward those more fortunate than oneself. Dharma happiness is incompatible with making comparison and envy the measure of one's life.

The goddesses discover that letting go is not merely deprivation. It can itself be a source of joy.

Returning to Māra's realm

When Māra asks for them back, the goddesses are reluctant because they no longer wish to be absorbed in sensual infatuation. Vimalakīrti teaches them how to continue practising in that environment.

The point is not that everyone should remain in harmful circumstances. It is that their spiritual life need not depend upon remaining physically beside Vimalakīrti. What they have learned can become active wherever they are.

The Inexhaustible Lamp

The 84000 sutra (appended to the full text) makes their practice explicit: they should follow the Dharma door called the Inexhaustible Lamp. One lamp can light many other lamps without losing its own flame. Similarly, helping others develop bodhicitta and wholesome qualities need not diminish one's own understanding. Through practising and sharing them, those qualities can grow stronger.

The goddesses therefore return not merely as people protecting a private spiritual attainment, but as bearers of the teaching. They can inspire other gods and goddesses with the aspiration to awakening.

This completes the reversal of Māra's intention. What began as an attempt to distract a practitioner becomes an opportunity to spread the Dharma within Māra's own realm.

The main lesson

Wisdom first sees through deception; compassion then sees whom the situation can help. Dharma happiness replaces dependence on craving, and that happiness matures through being shared. The practitioner becomes an inexhaustible lamp rather than a guarded store of private purity.

Sudatta — The greatest offering is the Dharma embodied for the benefit of all beings

What Sudatta was doing: Sudatta was conducting a great seven-day distribution of gifts to religious practitioners, poor people, beggars and others in need. His generosity was substantial and sincere. Vimalakīrti nevertheless told him that he should make a Dharma offering rather than confine himself to an offering of material goods.

What Vimalakīrti challenges

A material distribution is necessarily limited. It takes place at a particular time, reaches particular people and uses resources that can be exhausted. Vimalakīrti asks Sudatta to expand his understanding of giving beyond the organisation of a generous event.

The question is not only, "How much have I distributed?" It is also, "What kind of mind and life am I cultivating, and toward whose liberation are they directed?"

Giving to all beings at once

Thich Nhat Hanh emphasises that a Dharma offering embraces all living beings without excluding anyone. This does not mean that one act of generosity literally feeds every hungry being simultaneously. Its universality lies in the scope of the compassion and aspiration: no being is ruled out as unworthy of concern.

One can give food to the person immediately before one while dedicating the practice to the welfare and awakening of all beings. The practical action is particular; the compassionate intention is not restricted to a favoured group. Thus the limitations of a single event need not become the limitations of the heart.

A Dharma offering is more than a Dharma talk

The most important clarification is that “offering the Dharma” does not simply mean replacing food with a sermon.

Vimalakīrti describes an offering made through the whole bodhisattva path:

- Loving-kindness seeks beings’ happiness.
- Compassion responds to their suffering.
- Joy delights in their welfare.
- Equanimity prevents care from being governed by preference and aversion.
- The six perfections develop the qualities through which help becomes wise and effective.
- The means of gathering beings bring generosity, kind speech, beneficial action and cooperation into relationship.
- Learning becomes practice.
- Merit and understanding are directed toward the development of others.

The giver offers more than possessions. The giver offers the fruits of practice: greater patience, clearer understanding, trustworthy conduct and the capacity to help without domination.

The three doors of liberation must lead back into compassionate activity

The 84000 account makes a particularly important connection between emptiness and service.

Meditation on emptiness is fulfilled in helping beings develop. Wishlessness is joined to the bodhisattva’s willingness to return to birth for their sake.

These pairings prevent a misunderstanding:

- Emptiness does not mean that there are no beings to help.
- Signlessness does not mean ignoring the particular conditions before us.
- Wishlessness does not mean abandoning compassionate purpose.

Rather, the bodhisattva acts without grasping an independent helper, a fixed recipient or a personal reward. Freedom from self-centred acquisition makes sustained service possible.

The offering also removes pride

The sutra connects freedom from pride with willingness to serve and learn from living beings.

The benefactor must not become a superior person looking down upon recipients. Those who need assistance are not merely occasions for the donor to accumulate merit. They are persons to be respected and beings from whom the practitioner can learn.

This turns generosity from an assertion of status into a relationship of care.

The divided necklace: compassion and reverence meet

Moved by the teaching, Sudatta offers Vimalakīrti a valuable necklace. Vimalakīrti divides it, giving one half to a destitute person and the other to a Buddha. The 84000 translation adds an important detail: the poor recipient had been disdained by others at the gathering. The act therefore challenges more than an abstract distinction between “highest” and “lowest.” Vimalakīrti deliberately honours someone whom the assembly has treated as beneath consideration.

He explains that giving to the lowliest poor with the same reverence one brings to an offering to the Buddha fulfils the Dharma offering when it is impartial, loving and free from expectation of reward.

This does not mean that a Buddha and an unawakened person have identical conventional qualities. **It means that spiritual reverence must not coexist with contempt for those who suffer.**

Material generosity is retained and transformed

The necklace is still given. The hungry still require food. Nothing in the deeper teaching makes material help unnecessary.

Vimalakīrti transforms material giving by placing it within universal compassion, non-attachment and the path of awakening. The distinction is not between “inferior food” and “superior words,” but between generosity understood narrowly and generosity expressing the whole Dharma.

The main lesson

A Dharma offering is a life increasingly made available for the welfare and awakening of beings. Material gifts remain important, but their fullest meaning emerges when they express wisdom, compassion, equality and freedom from the wish for personal reward.

What the four encounters teach together

These encounters should not be reduced to four examples of spiritual possessiveness. They offer a connected account of the bodhisattva path.

Maitreya is asked to understand awakening without making it an object acquired by a separate self. Prabhāvyūha learns that the seat of awakening is established through actual qualities of mind and conduct. Jagatindhara’s story shows how discernment, Dharma happiness and the sharing of wisdom transform a threatening encounter. Sudatta learns to make generosity an expression of the entire path, embracing all beings without discrimination.

The chapter moves from **the nature of awakening to its embodiment and communication.**

Chapter 4 in One Sentence Vimalakīrti teaches that awakening is not a future possession or a distant place: it is realised through freedom from grasping and expressed through wholehearted practice, Dharma happiness, the awakening of others and generosity that excludes no being.

5. Mañjuśrī enters the sickroom: emptiness becomes compassion

Mañjuśrī alone accepts the Buddha’s request without claiming superiority. The entire assembly follows him to Vimalakīrti’s house. The empty room now becomes the dramatic centre of the sutra. Thich Nhat Hanh interprets its emptiness symbolically: because it is not filled by possessions and fixed arrangements, it can receive an immeasurable assembly. The text explicitly gives us the empty room; its treatment as a symbol of the creative capacity of emptiness is the commentary’s illuminating extension.

No-coming and no-going

Vimalakīrti greets Mañjuśrī by saying that his coming bears no sign of coming and his seeing bears no sign of seeing. Mañjuśrī understands the level at which Vimalakīrti is speaking and replies that what has come does not truly come, and what has gone does not truly go.

This does not deny conventional movement. Mañjuśrī and the assembly have plainly travelled to Vimalakīrti’s house. It means that nothing comes into existence independently from nowhere or passes out of existence into nothing. A person “arrives” when the necessary causes and conditions produce that appearance, just as a cloud manifests when atmospheric conditions are sufficient. When those conditions change, the person or cloud continues in other forms rather than departing into absolute nonexistence.

Their greeting establishes the method of the conversation: ordinary events remain conventionally true, but Vimalakīrti (in keeping with his usual insistence on ‘ultimate’) immediately asks that they also be understood from the perspective of their empty, dependent nature.

Vimalakīrti’s illness has no independent, fixed essence. It arises from conditions; more profoundly, ‘because living beings are sick, I am sick.’ The bodhisattva’s compassion makes the suffering of others inseparable from his own concern. Yet compassion must be joined to wisdom: if sickness is reified, both patient

and carer become imprisoned by it; if emptiness is used to dismiss pain, care disappears. The patient is comforted without being encouraged either to cling to the body or to hate it.

The inquiry moves repeatedly between two truths. Conventionally, bodies become ill, causes matter, treatment helps and beings suffer. Ultimately, no self-existing patient, illness or cure can be isolated. These are not rival descriptions. Emptiness explains why illness is conditional and therefore why response and transformation are possible.

The famous question about where emptiness should be sought leads into the sixty-two wrong views and the mental formations of living beings. The point is not that delusion is secretly admirable. Emptiness is not somewhere outside deluded experience; the very views that bind us have no fixed nature and can be understood and transformed. Thich Nhat Hanh's compost image captures this movement: the flower does not arise by pretending the refuse was never there.

Self, designation and nonattainment

Vimalakīrti traces sickness more deeply to **grasping** at "I" and "mine." This **grasping** can take several forms: identifying the aggregates as oneself; regarding them as possessions belonging to a separate self; imagining a 'self' contained within the aggregates or the aggregates contained within a 'self'; or identifying oneself with an eternal universal reality. In all cases, a fixed self is constructed in relation to something else.

The teaching does not replace the idea of self with a solid object called nirvāṇa. "Self" and "nirvāṇa" are both designations: names used within thought and language. Their emptiness does not mean that nothing exists; it means that neither designation points to an independently existing essence.

Thich Nhat Hanh connects this with the Middle Way. Phenomena arise dependently, can be named conventionally, and are empty of separate existence. Being and nonbeing are therefore inadequate extremes. Things function and affect us, but not in the self-existing manner suggested by our concepts.

Vimalakīrti then connects sickness with the apparent division between a perceiving subject inside and a perceived object outside. As long as an independent "I" seems to grasp an independently existing object, attachment and fear arise. "Nonattainment" means seeing that neither side of this division can be established independently. It does not mean that nothing can be learned or accomplished; it means that no separate possessor or self-existing object of possession can ultimately be found.

Wisdom and skilful means: neither escape nor entanglement

The sickroom teaching culminates in the relationship between wisdom and skilful means. Wisdom realises emptiness; skilful means applies that realization compassionately within the actual conditions of living beings. Either becomes a fetter when separated from the other.

Wisdom without skilful means can become detachment from the world. A practitioner may understand emptiness yet use meditation, signlessness or nirvāṇa as a protected refuge from suffering and responsibility. Skilful means without wisdom can become anxious or possessive activity: a solid helper attempts to save solid others and becomes attached to results.

The liberated bodhisattva combines the two. Understanding that beings and suffering are empty of fixed nature makes compassionate transformation possible; compassion prevents emptiness from becoming indifference.

Thich Nhat Hanh gives this a deliberately concrete form. To "adorn a Buddha-field" includes making one's body, community and surroundings peaceful, welcoming and beautiful. Sweeping a floor, tending a garden and creating conditions in which people can practise are not distractions from ultimate truth. They are skilful means through which wisdom takes form.

The Middle Way is therefore neither contamination by saṃsāra nor withdrawal into nirvāṇa. The bodhisattva remains in the conditioned world without being governed by it and realises the unconditioned without using it to abandon the world. Thich Nhat Hanh calls this the way of non-indifference.

6. Inconceivable liberation: emptiness is freedom from fixed scale

Vimalakīrti borrows enormous lion thrones, and his small room contains them without enlargement or obstruction. Mountains enter mustard seeds; oceans fit within pores; long periods become brief and brief periods become vast. Read merely as supernatural display, these scenes can feel remote. Philosophically, they loosen the measures by which we declare reality fixed: large and small, near and far, long and short exist dependently and comparatively.

The miracle also depicts skilful means. A bodhisattva can make the teaching spacious enough for different capacities without abandoning emptiness. Thich Nhat Hanh relates this cosmic imagery to ordinary mindfulness: when fixed habits loosen, commonplace acts (walking, breathing, listening) become ‘inconceivable’ in the sense that they are no longer confined by our habitual concepts.

7. The goddess: nonduality tested in language, flowers and gender

How can a bodhisattva love beings who are empty?

Before the goddess appears, Mañjuśrī asks how a bodhisattva should regard living beings. Vimalakīrti compares them to reflections, mirages, echoes, clouds, bubbles, flashes of lightning and magical creations. These images mean that beings lack fixed, independent selves; they do not mean that living beings are nonexistent or that their suffering can be ignored.

Mañjuśrī therefore asks the essential question: if beings are like illusions, how can the bodhisattva generate great love for them?

Vimalakīrti’s answer is that understanding emptiness purifies love rather than abolishing it. Because the bodhisattva no longer grasps a permanent self who loves or a fixed person who must be possessed, love can become less fearful, partial and controlling. It seeks to give others the liberating understanding the bodhisattva has discovered.

Great compassion dedicates every wholesome quality to living beings. Great joy gives without regret. Equanimity seeks the welfare of self and others without attachment or aversion. Emptiness therefore removes possessiveness from compassion; it does not remove its object or its urgency.

The teaching answers a central danger in reading the sutra: illusory does not mean unimportant. A dream is empty of the reality it appears to possess, but suffering experienced within the dream still calls for awakening. The bodhisattva sees both the suffering and its emptiness.

A goddess who has lived in Vimalakīrti’s house scatters flowers. They fall from the bodhisattvas but cling to the disciples, who try to shake them off. She explains that the flowers do not discriminate; the disciples’ discrimination makes them stick. Liberation is not achieved by making the world sterile, but by ceasing to bind experience with grasping and aversion.

Her dialogue with Śāriputra overturns further dualisms. Language can be empty without becoming useless: words are marks of liberation when they are used without attachment. Afflictions and liberation are not two self-existing domains; the same empty mental formation can bind when grasped and release when understood. This does not mean greed and freedom are conventionally identical, but that no affliction possesses an immutable essence.

All practices stand on “no standpoint”

The dialogue also traces affliction back through a chain of dependence. To liberate beings, the bodhisattva addresses their afflictions; affliction is sustained by distorted mental constructions; these arise from inverted perception: the failure to see things as they are.

When Mañjuśrī asks what supports inverted perception, Vimalakīrti answers: “no standpoint.” He then says that all phenomena take their stand upon no standpoint.

This difficult expression means that no phenomenon possesses a final, independent foundation upon which it rests. Everything arises through other conditions, and those conditions depend upon still others. No self-existing ground is eventually reached.

“No standpoint” does not leave the bodhisattva paralysed. It prevents practice from becoming attached to a fixed view, identity or metaphysical foundation. Because no condition is absolute, conditions can be changed. The bodhisattva undertakes immense compassionate activity while understanding that neither the actor, the action nor its objects exist independently.

The goddess then exchanges sex with Śāriputra. The scene exposes the absurdity of treating female or male identity as an inherent spiritual nature. Conventional embodiment remains, but it cannot ground a hierarchy of awakening. Thich Nhat Hanh correctly stresses both sides: emptiness challenges prejudice; it should not be used to deny people’s lived experience of gender.

8. The family of the Tathāgata: lotus and mud

When asked about the ‘family’ or seed of the Tathāgata, Vimalakīrti locates it among wrong views, afflictions and the ordinary world. A lotus does not grow in empty sky. Beings who confront greed, hatred and delusion can generate the resolve, compassion and wisdom of awakening. The point is not to cultivate affliction deliberately, but to refuse the fantasy that Buddhahood must be imported from somewhere untouched by life.

Vimalakīrti’s poem recasts the whole household: wisdom is mother, skilful means father, Dharma-joy the partner, compassion the daughters, truth the sons, emptiness the home, afflictions the disciples, the perfections the companions. The lay household becomes a map of bodhisattva practice. Thich Nhat Hanh sees here a decisive bridge from Prajñāpāramitā emptiness to the vivid, interpenetrating world associated with the Avataṃsaka: emptiness flowers as engaged life rather than negation.

9. The entrance into nonduality: distinctions without absolutising

A succession of bodhisattvas explains nonduality through pairs: birth and death, self and other, defilement and purity, wholesome and unwholesome, mundane and transcendent, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, form and emptiness. Each answer shows that the pair depends on conceptual division and lacks separate intrinsic nature.

Nonduality does not mean that everything is one substance, nor that ethical distinctions disappear. Harm and care have different conventional effects. The error is to imagine either member of a pair as independent and absolute. Once their dependent nature is seen, a practitioner can respond wisely without converting the response into another fixed identity.

Mañjuśrī says that entry into nonduality is beyond speech, designation and debate. Vimalakīrti responds with silence. This is not merely refusing to answer, and it is not a doctrine that speech is bad: the entire sutra has used exuberant language. His silence prevents the final teaching from becoming one more object to grasp. Words can lead to the threshold; silence enacts the relinquishment they describe.

10. The Land of Fragrance: different worlds require different Dharma doors

When Śāriputra wonders what the assembly will eat, Vimalakīrti reveals the distant Buddha-field of Sugandhakūṭa. Its Buddha teaches by fragrance rather than words, and a tiny portion of fragrant food feeds the immense gathering without exhaustion. The visiting bodhisattvas are told to reduce their splendour and not despise the troubled Sahā world.

The contrast teaches skilful means. No single form of Dharma instruction is absolute: fragrance teaches in one world; blunt words and many disciplines are needed in another. Difficulty itself creates opportunities for generosity, ethical restraint, patience, diligence, concentration and wisdom. The Sahā world’s hardship is not romanticised, but neither is it spiritually inferior. Compassion can develop an intensity here that ease does not demand.

Thich Nhat Hanh interprets the fragrance as the fragrance of ethical conduct, concentration, insight, liberation and the knowledge of liberation. This is interpretive symbolism rather than a literal gloss, but it makes the episode practically intelligible: people learn not only from speech but from the atmosphere created by a practitioner’s conduct.

Anything can perform the work of a Buddha

The fragrant food does more than feed the assembly: its fragrance remains until each person has reached the corresponding stage of spiritual development. Food itself becomes a means of awakening.

The Buddha then explains that different Buddha-fields accomplish Buddha-work through different means: light, bodhisattvas, trees, clothing, food, gardens, buildings, space, words, silence, dreams, reflections, mirages and even the conditions represented by Māra and the afflictions. No particular outward form has a monopoly upon the Dharma.

Thich Nhat Hanh brings this teaching into ordinary conduct. Walking, standing, sitting, lying down, breathing, smiling, listening and looking at another person can all perform the work of a Buddha when they communicate mindfulness, peace and compassion. Buddha-work is not confined to preaching, building temples or conducting ceremonies.

The teaching should not be taken to mean that everything automatically liberates. An object or action performs Buddha-work when it is used skilfully to diminish confusion and suffering. Its spiritual value lies not in its conventional form but in what it enables beings to understand and become.

The bodhisattvas from the Land of Fragrance are also given eight practical disciplines for serving within an imperfect world: benefit beings without expecting repayment; accept responsibility for their suffering and dedicate merit to them; remain inclusive and humble; honour other bodhisattvas; receive profound teachings without fear while avoiding hostility toward other paths; abandon envy and boasting; examine one's own faults rather than condemning others; and remain vigilant in cultivating virtue.

These disciplines qualify the sutra's earlier critical treatment of the hearers. Thich Nhat Hanh pointedly observes that Vimalakīrti himself needs to remember instruction not to oppose the śrāvaka path. The deeper Mahāyāna teaching should produce humility & inclusiveness, not a new form of sectarian superiority.

11. Neither destroying the conditioned nor dwelling in the unconditioned

Back before the Buddha, the visitors hear the central formula for bodhisattva conduct: do not exhaust or abandon the conditioned, and do not abide in the unconditioned. The conditioned world includes fragile bodies, institutions, conflict, change and suffering. The unconditioned indicates nirvāṇic peace and freedom from grasping.

To abandon the conditioned would be to desert beings and the practices by which they are helped. To dwell in the unconditioned would be to turn peace or emptiness into a refuge from relationship. The bodhisattva understands impermanence without neglecting wholesome causes, recognises suffering without hating existence, and realises nirvāṇa without remaining in private quietude. This is the sutra's mature balance of wisdom and skilful means.

12. Akṣobhya, Dharma offering and transmission

Vimalakīrti explains that the true Buddha cannot be captured as a body, aggregate, time-bound object, conditioned thing or unconditioned thing. To 'see' the Buddha is to see the reality or suchness that cannot be possessed by concepts. Asked about his former life, he likewise denies ultimately real death and rebirth while still speaking conventionally of the continuity of wholesome activity.

The Buddha reveals that Vimalakīrti came from Akṣobhya's pure land, Abhirati. Why enter an impure world? Like the sun rising to dispel darkness, a bodhisattva enters troubled fields without sharing their afflictions, precisely to illuminate them. The spectacular appearance of Abhirati within the Sahā world confirms that purity and impurity are not sealed locations.

The concluding Dharma-offering teaching places understanding and embodiment above material veneration. To preserve, investigate, teach and live a profound sutra is the highest offering. One relies on meaning rather than literal expression, wisdom rather than habitual consciousness, definitive insight rather than superficial formulation, and Dharma rather than the status of a speaker. Entrusting the text to future practitioners makes transmission itself a bodhisattva practice.

Part Two — The sutra organised by practice

1. Emptiness as dependent possibility

Emptiness means absence of intrinsic, independent nature. It does not mean nonexistence. Because illness, identity, affliction, sacred place, attainment and even doctrinal formulations arise dependently, none is permanently locked into what it now appears to be. This is why transformation, responsibility and compassion remain meaningful.

2. Nonduality as freedom from rigid opposition

Nonduality releases the mind from turning useful distinctions into absolute realities. It does not erase conventional differences. The practitioner can distinguish healing from harm and wisdom from confusion while knowing that these are relational, conditioned realities, not eternal substances.

3. Wisdom and skilful means must remain together

Wisdom without skilful means can become sterile detachment; skilful activity without wisdom can reinforce a rescuer, a victim and an achievement. Vimalakīrti's illness, his social roles and his changing modes of instruction show compassionate action shaped by emptiness.

4. The bodhisattva does not escape the world

The pure land is cultivated among beings. Bars, marketplaces, government, family, sickness and conflict can become fields of awakening. This never makes exploitation harmless; it demands the stability to enter difficult conditions without being ruled by them.

5. Do not grasp the Dharma

Meditation, precepts, generosity, renunciation, doctrinal truth and the aspiration to Buddhahood all remain indispensable. The sutra's satire is directed at possessing them: 'my purity,' 'my attainment,' 'my correct teaching.' Dharma is a raft and an activity, not a self to defend.

6. Compassion is participation, not sentiment

'Because beings are sick, I am sick' describes a compassion that refuses separation. Thich Nhat Hanh develops this through interbeing and engaged Buddhism. The language is his characteristic interpretation, but it faithfully illuminates the sutra's refusal to divide private liberation from collective suffering.

7. Every encounter can do the work of a Buddha

The sutra allows words, silence, food, fragrance, gesture, beauty, adversity and even confrontation to become Dharma doors. No method is universally supreme apart from the beings and conditions it serves. The test is whether it diminishes grasping and suffering and increases freedom, wisdom and compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh and the sutra: a balanced comparison

Where the commentary closely follows the text

- It places nonduality and the union of wisdom with skilful means at the centre.
- It reads the lay Vimalakīrti as a challenge to any monopoly of awakening by religious status.
- It emphasises that Buddha-fields are cultivated through the transformation and benefit of living beings.
- It understands affliction and adversity as workable conditions rather than intrinsically impure substances.
- It insists that emptiness is not withdrawal from the conventional world.

Where Thich Nhat Hanh adds a distinctive interpretive voice

- 'Interbeing,' 'engaged Buddhism,' 'lotus and mud,' 'compost' and the Pure Land in the present moment are his modern organising expressions. They illuminate the text but should not be presented as though they were all its exact words.

- He translates cosmic marvels into practices of mindfulness and everyday conduct, making the sutra existential rather than merely mythological.
- He often compares Kumārajīva with Xuanzang and occasionally prefers the latter's clarity. The 84000 Tibetan translation provides a third witness and sometimes differs in names, enumeration and arrangement.
- He openly criticizes the sutra's contemptuous rhetoric toward śrāvakas and its occasional devaluation of the physical body. This is an ethical and pedagogical correction, not simply a paraphrase of the ancient authors' stance.
- His historical reconstruction of a lay movement resisting monastic exclusivity is plausible as a reading of the text's social force, but it is more interpretive than the sutra's own explicit self-description.

A caution about the polemic

The sutra sometimes speaks as though śrāvakas were spiritually sterile 'rotten seeds' and makes Śāriputra a recurring comic target. Its philosophical correction remains powerful: personal peace must not replace universal compassion, and formulas must not be reified. But the rhetoric should not be turned into sectarian contempt. Thich Nhat Hanh is especially helpful here, reminding the reader that these are literary roles and that the historical disciples were profound practitioners.

The argument of the whole sutra

The sutra's argument can be followed as a single movement:

- Awakening is for the benefit of living beings; therefore the bodhisattva's field is this relational world.
- To work freely in that field, the bodhisattva must see that persons, afflictions, practices and attainments lack intrinsic nature.
- That insight prevents attachment, but it must not become nihilism, passivity or an escape into private peace.
- Wisdom therefore expresses itself as skilful means: entering the actual conditions of beings and using whatever can genuinely liberate them.
- Nonduality is the mature form of this freedom—distinctions are used without being absolutised.
- The result is inconceivable liberation: not freedom from the world, but freedom to act within it without being confined by fixed identity, scale, doctrine or fear.

BRIEF SUMMARY The Vimalakīrti Sutra dramatizes emptiness as the basis of fearless compassionate activity. Its lay hero repeatedly overturns attachment to spiritual status, doctrine, purity, place and attainment. Yet the sutra does not discard conventional practice: it shows how meditation, ethics, generosity and wisdom become truly liberating when no fixed self possesses them. The bodhisattva realizes nonduality, refuses both saṃsāric entanglement and private escape, and makes the troubled world itself the field of awakening.

Concluding perspective

The Vimalakīrti Sutra is challenging because it will not allow emptiness to remain a safe abstraction. Every time a distinction becomes secure—monk and layperson, pure and impure, saṃsāra and nirvāṇa, male and female, speech and silence, wisdom and affliction—the sutra asks whether the mind has made dependent realities absolute. Yet it is equally unwilling to let emptiness dissolve ethical life. The bodhisattva still gives, keeps discipline, develops patience, meditates, teaches, tends illness and enters suffering worlds.

Its deepest lesson is therefore not that distinctions are false and nothing matters. It is that nothing exists in the isolated, fixed manner grasping supposes—and for that very reason everything matters relationally. Actions have effects; suffering calls for response; people can change; and no circumstance is excluded in advance from becoming a door of liberation.