The Vimalakīrti Sutra Explanatory Mind Map

Central purpose
- Join wisdom and compassionate activity
- Emptiness makes transformation possible
- Conventional suffering still calls for a response
- Awakening is practised in relationship and ordinary life
- Freedom in the world — not escape from the world

How to read the sutra
- A dramatic teaching rather than a systematic treatise
- Vimalakīrti — accomplished bodhisattva in lay form
- Literary disciples expose restricted approaches
- Conventional and ultimate perspectives must be held together
- Thích Nhat Hanh — interbeing and engaged practice
- Chapter arrangements
  - Thích Nhat Hanh 14-chapter Chinese recension
  - 84000 12-chapter Tibetan recension
  - Compare corresponding episodes, not chapter numbers

1. The Buddha-field
- The bodhisattva's field is living beings
- A Pure Land is cultivated through mind and conduct
  - Directness and bodhicitta
  - Six perfections
  - Four immeasurables
  - Means of gathering and benefiting beings
- Śāriputra sees impurity — Buddha reveals splendour
- Purity is not denial of pain or victim-blaming
  - Thích Nhat Hanh create the Pure Land here
  - The lotus grows from mud
  - Transform this world rather than flee it

2. Vimalakīrti and skilful means
- Enters every social setting without being captured by it
- Religious and secular life are not sealed apart
- Illness used as a Dharma door
  - Kashō Koshiba
- Body is impermanent and vulnerable
  - Dharma-body wisdom, compassion and awakened qualities
- Do not despise the physical body
- It is where mindfulness and compassion become visible
- Lay form does not mean ordinary attachments need no transformation

3. The hearer disciples
- Vimalakīrti's method
  - **Demand** that conventional understanding be deepened by ultimate insight
  - Reveal subtle attachment within valid practices
  - Retain the practice remove reification
- **Śāriputra** — meditation
  - **Problem** stillness dependent on withdrawal
  - **Teaching** remain undispersed amid experience
  - Meditation continues through walking, working and relationship
  - Stillness and compassionate activity are not opposed
- **Maudgalyāyana** — teaching
  - **Problem** words and concepts mistaken for Dharma
  - Labels do not reveal independently existing entities
  - Past, present and future are dependently designated
  - Use words as pointers without being caught in them
  - Knowledge must become insight
- **Mahākāśyapa** — alms & equality
  - **Problem** compassionate preference makes fast rich and poor
  - Alms round is a practice, not merely a transaction
  - Giver, receiver and gift arise together
  - Equality is not indifference to unequal need
- **Subhūti** — emptiness & affliction
  - **Problem** liberation placed outside affliction
  - Neither reject afflictions nor identify with them
  - Affliction is not awakening — but can be transformed into it
  - Flowers and refuse — each contains conditions of the other
  - Gravest wrongdoing remains empty and transformable
    - Emptiness does not remove consequences
    - It leaves open regret, remorse, restraint and transformation
  - Bondage contains liberation
    - Bondage lacks permanent nature
  - Liberation contains bondage
    - Grasping 'my liberation' becomes another fetter
  - Four Noble Truths practise without reifying them
- **Pūrṇa** — teaching according to capacity
  - **Problem** taught the path he knew, not what listeners needed
  - Discern capacities, aspirations and previous roots
  - Do not fit the ocean into a buffalo's footprint
  - Skilful means is neither automatic simplification nor automatic elevation
- **Mahākātyāyana** — doctrinal analysis
  - **Problem** truths frozen into formulas about solid things
  - **Impermanence** — dependent transformation, not annihilation
  - **Suffering** — bound to grasping, not an eternal essence
  - **Emptiness** — no prior self-existence reduced to nothing
  - **No-self** — releases a mistake, not a metaphysical opposite
  - **Nirvāṇa** — present cessation of grasping, not a separate future place
- **Anuruddha** — divine vision
  - **Problem** spiritual power treated as a measurable possession
  - Conditioned clairvoyance is not liberating wisdom
  - True vision has no fixed seer confronting fixed objects
- **Upāli** — ethics and guilt
  - **Problem** offence treated as a fixed stain and identity
  - Acknowledge action, causes and consequences
  - Confession, restraint, reparation and changed conditions
  - Accountability without an incurably guilty self
  - Emptiness enables ethical rehabilitation
- **Rāhula** — renunciation
  - **Problem** letting go presented as spiritual profit
  - Merit, status and purity can become new possessions
  - True leaving home abandons attachment and fixed views
  - Bodhicitta is the essence of inward renunciation
- **Ānanda** — the Buddha-body
  - **Problem** Buddha reduced to the conditioned body
  - Dharma-body is not exhausted by physical form
  - Heavenly voice restores conventional truth
    - The Buddha appears ill and still needs care
  - Neither mere organism nor disembodied absolute
- Common correction
  - Use distinctions without making them absolute
  - Practise without constructing a spiritual self
  - Join emptiness, compassion and skilful means

4. The four bodhisattvas
- Mahāyāna aspiration can also be restricted
- **Maitreya** — nature of awakening
  - Prediction of Buddhahood examined through the three times
  - Suchness is neither born nor acquired
  - Awakening does not manufacture true nature
  - Cultivate its conditions do not possess it as an object
- Bodhi
  - Enlightenment
  - Beyond conceptual grasping
  - Cessation of fixed views
  - Letting go of attainment
  - Unobstructed, peaceful and nondual
- **Prabhāvyūha** — seat of awakening
  - Vimalakīrti comes from the seat of awakening
  - Seat established by mind and conduct
    - Honesty, resolve and bodhicitta
    - Six perfections and four immeasurables
    - Learning made into lived understanding
    - Dependent arising and benefit of beings
  - Afflictions, Māra and the three realms can become practice fields
  - Being governed by affliction is not practising with affliction
  - Every action can come from the seat of awakening
- **Jagatindhara** — discernment and Dharma happiness
  - Māra disguised as Indra
  - Correct religious advice is not the same as seeing clearly
  - Mindfulness recognizes deception and wrong thinking
  - Vimalakīrti sees potential practitioners, not temptations
- Dharma happiness
  - Faith, generosity and benefit of beings
  - Ethics, patience, mindfulness and wisdom
  - Bodhicitta and freedom from envy
  - Letting go is not joyless deprivation
  - Return to Māra's realm with a practice
- Inexhaustible Lamp
  - One lamp lights others without losing its flame
  - Sharing wholesome qualities strengthens them
  - Private realization becomes transmission
- **Sudatta** — Dharma offering
  - Material giving is sincere but limited in reach and duration
  - Universal compassion excludes no being
  - Dharma offering is more than giving a sermon
    - Four immeasurables
    - Six perfections
    - Three doors of liberation
    - Four means of gathering beings
  - Emptiness must return to compassionate activity
  - Giving removes pride — beings are not instruments of merit
  - Necklace divided between the disdained poor person and a Buddha
  - Reverence for Buddha cannot coexist with contempt for sufferers
- Movement of the chapter
  - **Nature** of awakening
  - **Embodiment** of awakening
  - **Happiness and sharing** of awakening
  - **Offering a life directed toward** awakening

5. Mañjuśrī enters the sickroom
- Mañjuśrī accepts without superiority or inferiority
- Empty room
  - Absence makes presence possible
  - Emptiness is capacity, not nothingness
- No-coming and no-going
  - Conventional movement remains valid
  - Nothing comes from nowhere or goes into nothing
  - Manifestation depends upon conditions
- Illness
  - Ignorance and craving
  - Because beings are sick, I am sick
  - Compassion makes others' suffering one's concern
  - Healing self and beings is inseparable
  - Emptiness found in wrong views and mental formations
  - Delusion has no fixed nature
  - Transformation occurs within experience
- Self and designation
  - Aggregates are not self or possessions of a separate self
  - Self and nirvāṇa are both designations
  - Middle Way — neither inherent being nor nothingness
- Nonattainment
  - Release division between inner subject and outer object
  - No separate possessor or possessed object
- Wisdom and skilful means
  - Wisdom alone can become sterile detachment
  - Activity alone can reinforce helper, recipient and result
  - Adorn the Buddha-field through concrete care and beauty
- Middle Way of non-indifference
  - Remain in conditioned life without being ruled by it
  - Realize the unconditioned without abandoning the world

6. Inconceivable liberation
- Vast lion thrones fit within the empty room
- Mountains in seeds, oceans in pores, long time made brief
- Large and small, near and far, long and short are relational
- Miracles loosen fixed measures of reality
- Skilful means adapts the Dharma to differing capacities
- Ordinary mindful life is also inconceivable
- Adversity and Māra can be transformed into Dharma doors
- Do not romanticize harm — transformation requires wisdom

7. The goddess
- Beings are like reflections, mirages and magical creations
- Empty does not mean nonexistent or unimportant
- How love empty beings?
  - Emptiness removes possessiveness from love
  - Compassion dedicates virtue to beings
  - Joy gives without regret
  - Equanimity benefits self and others without partiality
- All practices stand on no standpoint
  - No phenomenon rests on an independent final foundation
  - Lack of fixed foundation makes change possible
- Flowers cling to discriminatory thought, not to bodhisattvas
- Language can be empty and still liberating
- Affliction and liberation lack separate immutable essences
- Exchange of sex with Śāriputra
  - Gender has no inherent spiritual nature
  - Emptiness challenges hierarchy without denying lived embodiment

8. The family of the Tathāgata
- Seeds of Buddhahood found amid afflictions & wrong views
- Lotus does not grow in empty sky
- Do not cultivate affliction — transform its conditions
- Household of awakening
  - Wisdom — mother
  - Skilful means — father
  - Dharma joy — partner
  - Compassion — daughters
  - Truth — sons
  - Emptiness — home
  - Afflictions — disciples
  - Perfections — companions
  - Prajñāpāramitā emptiness flowers as engaged life

9. Entrance into nonduality
- Pairs examined
  - Birth and death
  - Self and other
  - Defilement and purity
  - Wholesome and unwholesome
  - Mundane and transcendent
  - Saṃsāra and nirvāṇa
  - Form and emptiness
- Pairs depend on conceptual division
- Nonduality is not monism
  - Not one and not two
  - Ethical and practical distinctions still function
  - Mañjuśrī — nonduality beyond designation and debate
- Vimalakīrti's silence
  - Not mere muteness or rejection of speech
  - Refuses to turn nonduality into another object

10. The Land of Fragrance
- Sugandhakūṭa teaches by fragrance rather than words
- Fragrant food feeds the vast assembly without exhaustion
- Different worlds require different Dharma doors
- Visitors must not despise the troubled Sahā world
- Difficulty creates opportunities for the perfections
- Fragrance of ethical conduct, concentration, insight and liberation
- Anything can perform Buddha-work
  - Light, food, gardens, space and speech
  - Silence, dreams, reflections and mirages
  - Walking, breathing, smiling and listening
  - Form is liberating only when skillfully used
  - Eight disciplines in an imperfect world
  - Benefit beings without repayment
  - Accept responsibility and dedicate merit
  - Remain inclusive and humble
  - Honour other bodhisattvas
  - Receive profound teachings without fear or sectarian hostility
  - Abandon envy and boasting
  - Examine one's own faults rather than condemning others
  - Remain vigilant in cultivating virtue

11. Bodhisattva comportment
- Do not abandon the conditioned
  - Remain with bodies, relationships, change and suffering
  - Continue loving-kindness, compassion and beneficial action
- Do not dwell in the unconditioned
  - Do not make emptiness or peace a private refuge
  - Realize nirvāṇa without withdrawing from beings
  - Understand impermanence without neglecting wholesome causes
  - Recognize suffering without hating existence
  - Wisdom and skilful means reach mature balance

12. Akṣobhya and transmission
- Seeing the Buddha
  - Not confined to body, aggregates, time or conceptual categories
  - See through Dharma and suchness
  - Death and rebirth are like continuation of a magical performance
  - Vimalakīrti comes from Akṣobhya's Abhirati
- Why enter an impure world?
  - Like the sun appearing to dispel darkness
  - Bodhisattva enters without being governed by affliction
  - Abhirati appears within the Sahā world
  - Purity and impurity are not sealed locations
- Dharma offering
  - Understand, embody, preserve and teach profound Dharma
  - Rely on meaning rather than literal expression
  - Rely on wisdom rather than habitual consciousness
  - Rely on Dharma rather than personal authority
  - Transmission is itself bodhisattva practice

Practice synthesis
- Emptiness — dependent possibility, not nonexistence
- Nonduality — freedom from rigid opposition, not loss of discernment
- Wisdom and skilful means remain together
- The bodhisattva does not escape the world
- Do not grasp meditation, doctrine, ethics or attainment
- Compassion is participation, not sentiment
- Every encounter can become Buddha-work

Thích Nhat Hanh's interpretive lens
- Closely follows the sutra
  - Nonduality
  - Wisdom joined with skilful means
  - Lay form challenges monopoly by religious status
  - Buddha-fields cultivated among beings
  - Affliction and adversity are workable conditions
- Distinctive modern expressions
  - Interbeing
  - Engaged Buddhism
  - Lotus and mud — compost and flowers
  - Pure Land in the present moment
  - Cosmic imagery translated into everyday mindfulness
- Corrective cautions
  - Critiques contemptuous rhetoric toward hearers
  - Resists devaluation of the physical body
  - Literary foils are not historical biographies
  - Mahāyāna insight should not become sectarian superiority

Argument of the whole sutra
- The bodhisattva's field is the relational world of living beings
- Persons, afflictions, practices and attainments lack intrinsic nature
- Emptiness prevents attachment but not ethical responsibility
- Wisdom expresses itself as skilful compassionate action
- Nonduality uses distinctions without absolutising them
- Inconceivable liberation
  - Not freedom from the world
  - Freedom to act without fixed identity, doctrine or fear

Final insight
- Nothing exists in the isolated way grasping supposes
- Therefore actions, relationships and suffering matter profoundly
- Because conditions are not fixed, transformation is possible
- No circumstance is excluded from becoming a door of liberation