

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*: The Comedy of Paradox

by Jay G. Williams, *Department of Religion, Hamilton College, Clinton, NY*

During the last two decades there has been a growing recognition among Buddhologists of the importance of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* for Mahayana Buddhism in East Asia. This work, known in Chinese as *Wei-mo-ching*, and in Japanese as *Yuima-kyō*, derives from a non-extant Sanskrit original probably written sometime after 100 B.C. but before 100 A.D. References to the work by Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu indicate that it was very influential in India before its transmission to China.

The Chinese, in turn, were so impressed with it that at least seven different translations were made, including one by the famous and prolific Kumārajīva and another by Hsüan-tsang.¹ The fact that subsequently it was chosen by Shōtoku Taishi as one of the first three sutras to receive commentary in Japanese not only indicates its stature among East Asian Buddhists in the 6th century but assured for it a pre-eminent place among the sutras in Japan.

The first translation into a Western language was made by Ōhara Kakichi into English in 1898-1899. Perhaps because the translation was serialized in the Japanese Journal, *Hanseikaisasshi*² and thus was not readily available to many Western readers, the importance of the sutra was largely ignored. For instance, Sir Charles Eliot scarcely mentioned it in his definitive *Hinduism and Buddhism* of 1921, though he did pay slightly more notice to it in *Japanese Buddhism* in 1935. Despite the voluminous nature of *A History of Indian Philosophy* in five volumes, Surendranath Dasgupta provided, in 1922, only the briefest reference to the sutra. Karl Reichelt, in *Truth and Tradition in Chinese Buddhism* of 1927 says only:

Finally, we may mention *Wei-mo-ching* which gives the spiritual reflections of a pious monk on the deep teachings of the Buddha,³

The brevity of this statement is matched only by its inaccuracy.

It is to D. T. Suzuki's credit that he was keenly aware of the significance of the sutra and quoted it at some length in *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* in 1963.⁴ His treatment, however, gives little sense of the significance or contents of the work as a whole. Indeed, it would be very difficult to gain a gist of the work from the quotations offered. However, Suzuki's comments in several of his works alerted his readers to the significance of the *Wei-mo-ching* for Ch'an (and Zen) Buddhism and may have led to a greater appreciation of the sutra by students of Buddhism in general.

By 1972, less than a decade later, Kenneth Ch'en was able to write:

There is no question but that the *Vimalakīrti* is one of the most popular of Mahayana sutras. It is the sutra that inspired much of the sculpture in Lung-men and Yün-kang during the Northern Wei Dynasty. During the T'ang Dynasty episodes from the sutra were expanded into stories and ballads which were then recited before the multitudes gathered during the temple festivities.⁵

The following year, in 1973 at the XXIX Congrès International des Orientalistes in Paris, Hashimoto Hōkei read a paper on *The Philosophic Influence of the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra upon Chinese Culture*. Although the essay deals as much with Japan

as with China and really does not go far in assessing the philosophical import of the work, it is ground-breaking nonetheless, for it does more than any preceding work to assess properly the role of the sutra in Chinese Buddhism.

The influence of Hashimoto's essay was enhanced by two translations of the text into English — one by Charles Luk (Lu K'uan Yu) in 1972⁶ and one by Robert Thurman (from the Tibetan) in 1976.⁷ Both translations are accompanied by reasonably brief, non-technical introductions and notes. The availability of the Luk translation in paperback has made the sutra easily obtainable, particularly in America.

Despite all of these essays, books, and introductions, none truly prepares the reader for the work at hand. Kenneth Ch'en describes one episode as amusing but fails, like all the rest, to let the reader in on the secret — that the *Vimalakīrti* is, at times, a scandalously comic work which hardly seems the expression of ordinary, serious-minded Buddhism at all. The Buddha himself may not be dealt with irreverently by the sutra's good-natured humor but neither the Theravādin *bhikkhus* nor the Mahayanist bodhisattvas are left unscathed. As we shall see, on one level, at least, the book is irreverent in the extreme.

Even Luk, who provides us with the most comic of the translations, offers no interpretation of this aspect of the sutra in his introduction. Thurmond, in his turn, is so deadly serious that the work's irrepressible laughter is totally overlooked by him. His translation, to my mind, strains to be holy and hence misses the fun entirely. To be fair, however, this may be due as much to the Tibetan translation upon which he depends as to Thurmond himself.

The fact that religious interpreters have overlooked the comic element in the sutra should not be surprising to anyone acquainted with the history of exegesis. A similar example of a comic religious work being dealt with soberly can be found in the biblical *Book of Jonah*. Believers and skeptics have, for centuries, been so captured by

the apparent claim that a man lived in the belly of a fish, that they have, almost to a person, overlooked the fact that the book is enormously funny — and is intended to be. The same might be said of the parables of Jesus which feature such extraordinary images as a man with a log sticking out of his eye, a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle, and a person having difficulty swallowing a tiny gnat but taking a camel down easily. One could also cite any one of a number of ancient myths which feature divine hilarity, some of the more whimsical sayings of Master Kung, and, of course, the amusing writings of Chuang-tze and Lieh-tze.

The question is, of course: What is meant by the word "comic"? Far greater minds than mine have wrestled with this question, and I have no illusions about providing a universally acceptable definition. Indeed, the more what causes laughter is analyzed, the more difficult it is to say anything at all. Nevertheless, something must be proffered by way of a provisional definition if we are to proceed further.

What is it which makes us laugh? As I reflect upon the various laughter-generating ideas, sayings, and situations — from puns to slap-stick comedy to fantasy and romance — what strikes me as the constant throughout is unexpected incongruity. The pun begins with the right sound used in an unexpected and incongruous way. The Keystone Cops, Harold Lloyd, and, *mirabile dictu*, Burt Reynolds invariably get involved in situations where serious injury or death are to be the obvious result. What makes us laugh is that the disaster never occurs, for it is averted by a surprising conclusion which simply does not fit with the situation. The man falls twenty stories into a Kiddie Pool and, instead of dying, wipes off his face and walks away. Our laughter is an emotional release in response to a turn of events which is quite unexpected and incongruous.

I have already said that the *Book of Jonah* is funny. Why? A prophetic book is normally the expression of a holy man of God, a man who

suffers pain, humiliation, and perhaps, even death as a result of preaching God's Word. He is the prototype of the faithful believer. When the prophet turns out to be totally unwilling to serve God and, in fact, is far less pious than his pagan contemporaries, one either becomes angry or begins to laugh. When the same prophet begins to pout and lecture the Almighty about justice, it is difficult to suppress a smile.

The prophetic conventions lead us to expect one kind of book. There are few moments of amusement in the *Book of Amos*. When the stereotype is broken, we sense the incongruous and call it "funny". Or we refuse (for the sake of the Holiness of Scripture) to accept the possibility of such incongruity and argue about the historicity of life in a big fish instead. In the latter case it is the scholar, as much as the book, which should invoke laughter.

With this brief and certainly sketchy understanding of laughter, let us return to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*. The quotations used shall be drawn from Luk's translation, not because it is more learned, but because it captures better, I think, the flavor of the Chinese.

The sutra begins seriously enough, setting the stage for the drama which is to follow. We find the Buddha surrounded by 8,000 *bhikṣus* and 32,000 bodhisattvas in Amra Park in Vaiśālī. The scene is one of near perfection since each of these worthies is depicted as a person of extraordinary wisdom and spirituality. These are the holiest of the holy, the flower of Buddhist piety. The reader is led to expect this to be the typical sutra in which enlightenment is the commonplace.

Chapter three, however, introduces the incongruous in the form of the hero of the story Vimalakīrti himself. Vimalakīrti is by no means the typical Buddhist paragon of virtue. He is a layman, with wife and household, hardly a monastic recluse at all. Although his purposes are always the very best, he is said, nevertheless, to visit taverns, houses of prostitution, and gambling halls.

He wears jewelry, realizes a profit at his business, and frequents government offices. In other words, what the normal Buddhist monk abstains from for fear of pollution, Vimalakīrti is regularly in contact with.

What is even more unexpected — even implausible — is that none of the great *bhikṣus* or bodhisattvas so lauded in chapters one and two holds a spiritual candle to our lay hero. When Vimalakīrti becomes ill (he induces this sickness himself for pedagogical purposes), the Buddha is hard-pressed to find anyone from his followers who feels competent to go to comfort him. The first disciple to be asked to visit Vimalakīrti is the famous Śāriputra who figures so importantly in earlier sutra literature:

Vimalakīrti wondered why the great compassionate Buddha did not take pity on him as he was confined to bed suffering from an indisposition. The Buddha knew of his thought and said to Śāriputra: "Go to Vimalakīrti to enquire after his health on my behalf."

Śāriputra said: "World Honoured One, I am not qualified to call on him and enquire after his health. The reason is that once, as I was sitting in meditation under a tree in a grove, Vimalakīrti came and said: 'Śāriputra, meditation is not necessarily sitting. For meditation means the non-appearance of body and mind in the three worlds (of desire, form and no-form); giving no thought to inactivity when in nirvana while appearing (in the world) with respect-inspiring deportment; not straying from the Truth while attending to worldly affairs; the mind abiding neither within nor without; being imperturbable to wrong views during the practice of the thirty-seven contributory stages leading to enlightenment; and not wiping out troubles (*kleśa*) while entering the state of nirvana. If you can thus sit and meditate, you will win the Buddha's seal.'

"World Honoured One, when I heard his speech I was dumbfounded and found no word to answer him. Therefore I am not qualified to call on him and enquire after his health."⁸

This passage evokes laughter in two ways. First, the notion that the great Śāriputra would hesitate to call upon a mere layman is preposterous, by definition. Second, the idea of anyone telling the eminent *bhikṣu*, who has devoted endless hours to meditation, that meditation in the usual sense is unnecessary is wholly incongruous. It would be as though Menuhin counselled Stern about the uselessness of violin practice.

After Śāriputra declines the Buddha's invitation, he turns to first Maudgalaputra and then to Mahākāśyapa, Subhūti, Pūrṇamātirayaniputra, Mahākatyāyana, Aniruddha, Upāli, and Ānanda. Each presents essentially the same excuse: the last time I met Vimalakīrti he so amazed me with his extraordinary teaching that I am unworthy to comfort him now.

Such protestations are ludicrous enough, coming as they do from the holiest of the holy arhats, but the story does not end there. The Buddha, in Chapter four, turns to the bodhisattvas for help with very much the same result. Neither Maitreya, nor the Bodhisattva Glorious Light, nor Ruler of the World, nor Excellent Virtue is willing to help, for even the bodhisattvas are overwhelmed by the wisdom and piety of the layman Vimalakīrti. Finally, Mañjuśrī reluctantly agrees to go and even he finds himself, as it were, sitting at the feet of Vimalakīrti, attending to his devastating paradoxical message.

If the comic incongruity of a layman lecturing to one of the great bodhisattvas does not draw a smile, certainly what he teaches ought to produce, at the very least, a nervous laugh. Mahayana Buddhism, of course, frequently suggests man's paradoxical situation, but Vimalakīrti carries the paradox to its absolute extreme, utterly confound-

ing secular and sacred, righteousness and depravity, ego and egolessness.

Primary example of this emphasis is found in his conversation with Subhūti, which, for reason of brevity, I shall shorten slightly:

The Buddha then said to Subhūti: "You call on Vimalakīrti to enquire after his health on my behalf."

Subhūti said: "World Honoured One, I am not qualified to call on him and enquire after his health. The reason is that once I went to his house begging for food, he took my bowl and filled it with rice, saying: 'Subhūti, if your mind set on eating is in the same state as when confronting all (other) things, and if this uniformity as regards all things equally applies to (the act of) eating, you can then beg for food and eat it. Subhūti, if without cutting off carnality, anger and stupidity you can keep from these (three) evils; if you do not wait for the death of your body to achieve the oneness of all things; if you do not wipe out stupidity and love in our quest of enlightenment and liberation; if you give rise to neither the Four Noble Truths nor their opposites; if you do not hold both the concept of winning and not winning the holy fruit; if you do not regard yourself as a worldly or unworldly man, as a saint or not as a saint; if you perfect all Dharmas while keeping away from the concept of Dharmas, then can you receive and eat the food. Subhūti, if you neither see the Buddha nor hear the Dharma; if the six heterodox teachers, are regarded impartially as your own teachers and if, when they induce leavers of home into heterodoxy, you also fall with the latter; then you can take away the food and eat it. If you are (unprejudiced about) falling into heresy and regard yourself as not reaching the other shore (of enlightenment); if you (are unprejudiced about) defilements and

relinquish the concept of pure living; if when you realize *samādhi* in which there is absence of debate or disputation, all living beings also achieve it; if your donors of food are not regarded (with partiality) as (cultivating) the field of blessedness; if those making offerings to you (are impartially looked on as also) falling into the three evil realms of existence; if you (impartially) regard demons as your companions without differentiating between them as well as between other forms of defilement; if you are discontented with all living beings, defame the Buddha, break the law (Dharma), do not attain the holy rank, and fail to win liberation; then you can take away the food and eat it.'

"World Honoured One, I was dumbfounded when I heard his words which were beyond my reach and to which I found no answer. Then I left the bowl of rice and intended to leave his house but Vimalakīrti said: 'Hey, Subhūti, take the bowl of rice without fear. Are you frightened when the Tathāgata makes an illusory man ask you questions?' I replied: 'No.' He then continued: 'All things are illusory and you should not fear anything. Why? Because words and speech have no independent nature of their own, and when they are no more, you are liberated. This liberation will free you from all bondage.'" 9

Such a statement may not strike the modern reader as exactly proper material for a stand-up comedian, but it plays upon the same themes of incongruity and improbability which have always been the comic's stock-in-trade. If we do not laugh, it is either because we have never taken classical Buddhism seriously or because this sutra holds no authority for us.

The comedy does not end with the initial reticence of the disciples and bodhisattvas to visit Vimalakīrti. Eventually, Mañjuśrī does go and a

host gathers to hear the enlightened layman. Finally, Śāriputra arrives:

Śāriputra saw no seats in the room and thought: "Where do the Bodhisattvas and chief disciples sit?" Vimalakīrti knew of Śāriputra's thought and asked him: "Virtuous One, do you come here for a seat or for the Dharma?" Śāriputra replied: "I come here for the Dharma and not for a seat."

Vimalakīrti said: "Hey Śāriputra, he who searches for the Dharma does not even cling to his body and life, still less to a seat."¹⁰

Vimalakīrti, who seems to like to make fun of Śāriputra in particular, isn't finished with him yet. A little later he says to Mañjuśrī:

"Please take a lion throne and be seated amongst the great Bodhisattvas by enlarging the size of your body to that of the seat." Those Bodhisattvas who had acquired supernatural powers, enlarged their bodies to the size of the thrones on which they sat (without difficulty). But the newly initiated Bodhisattvas and chief disciples of the Buddha could not mount the high thrones.

Vimalakīrti then said to Śāriputra: "Please be seated on the lion throne." Śāriputra replied: "Venerable Upasaka, these thrones are large and high; we cannot mount them." Vimalakīrti said: "Śāriputra, you should first pay reverence to the Tathāgata Merukalpa and will then be able to sit on one of them."¹¹

The idea of Śāriputra, the great disciple, struggling like a three year old to climb up into a chair is an example of marvelously overstated humor. The writer, though obviously serious in intent, takes great delight in making fun of these venerable saints of old.

Still another episode in which Śāriputra is the goat is found in Chapter seven. An enlightened goddess has stepped forward to teach, and Śāriputra is a bit surprised (and skeptical) that a female could be so enlightened. Therefore he asks:

Why do not you change your female bodily form?

The goddess said: "All phenomena (including forms) are also unreal. So why have you asked me to change my unreal female body?"

Thereat, she used her supernatural powers to change Śāriputra into a heavenly goddess and herself into a man similar to Śāriputra, and asked him: "Why do not you change your female form?"

Śāriputra replied: "I do not know why I have turned into a goddess."

The goddess said: "Śāriputra, if you can change your female body, all women should also be able to turn into men. Like Śāriputra who is not a woman but appears in female bodily form, all women are the same and though they appear in female form, they are fundamentally not women."

Hence, the Buddha said: "All things are neither male nor female."

Thereat, the goddess again used her supernatural powers to change Śāriputra back to his (original) male body, and asked: "Where is your female body now?"¹²

So much for male chauvinism, even on the part of the great *bhikṣu*. In the Buddha there is neither male nor female, and those who think otherwise are very much a laughing matter.

I hope by now that I have at least established my reasons for responding to the *Vimalakīrti* with

laughter. The ultimate intent of the sutra is surely serious, of that there can be little doubt, but that seriousness is cloaked in a garment of laughter, as a divine comedy. Why? Why does the author take such pains to make Buddhism's ultimate message appear comic? What has the medium to do with the message?

My own belief is: everything. The philosophy of the sutra is one of absolute paradox. The rather straight-forward, literal philosophy of the Southern School of Buddhism is shattered as the old distinctions between good and evil, secular and sacred, *samsāra* and nirvana, enlightenment and ignorance are exploded.

Because this is so, it is no longer possible legitimately to tell stories in which monks are better than laymen or the sacred is better than the secular. *Vimalakīrti* is himself the message, for in him all distinctions are overcome. At the same time, however, there is another sense in which distinctions are preserved — must be preserved — if Buddhism is to mean anything at all. From one point of view, sitting in meditation is just an illusory action in an illusory world; yet from another it remains a path toward the goal. If it did not, Buddhism would devolve into meaninglessness.

The destruction of distinctions found in the *Vimalakīrti* comes perilously close to absolute anarchism and meaninglessness. How is it possible for an enlightened human being to counsel defaming the Buddha, breaking the law, and failing to win liberation? How is it possible for a true follower of the Buddha to say that the home-leaving path goes nowhere?

What prevents the sutra from becoming a counsel of despair is that ever-present comic sense of incongruity. Our laughter expresses that awareness of absolute tension between a counsel to defame the Buddha and the Buddha-mind which does such counselling; between an irreverent spoof of the great arhats and bodhisattvas and supreme reverence for the heroes of the faith. In a word, the comedy of *Vimalakīrti* rests upon and

points to the Great Paradox, the Ultimate Incongruity upon which Mahayana in its most sophisticated form rests.

It is true that not all Mahayanists have seen Buddhism as an expression of the comic spirit. There has been much somber earnestness in East as well as South Asia. Still, one must not overlook the popularity of the *Lotus Sutra*, another comic

work born of the Great Paradox, nor the Ch'an *kung-an* (*koan*) which are often full of comic mirth. Ultimately *wu* (*mu*), that bolt of sudden enlightenment, is a laughing matter. The Chinese are correct, and they may have learned this truth from *Vimalakīrti*: there must be a smile on the face of Mi-lo-fu (popularly referred to as the "Laughing Buddha").

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