

# The Lecture Notes of Chapter Two of the Vimalakirti Sutra

by Khenpo Sodargye's translation team

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## Lecture 9

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### A Few More Words about the First Chapter

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In the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, the first chapter, “Buddha Land”, serves as an introduction to this sutra. The main body of the sutra is from the second chapter to the twelfth chapter, which according to Master Kuiji’s commentary, can be divided into three parts: view (chapters 2-10), meditation (chapter 11), and fruition (chapter 12). The final two chapters (chapters 13-14) are dedicated as the exhortation for propagating this sutra.

In the first chapter, the essential message is that all phenomena are fundamentally pure and that a pure mind leads to a pure land. This can be briefly explained by the doctrine of the Chittamatra School: Everything is created by the mind, so as long as the mind is pure, the external world will become pure too. However, the profound meaning of this message can be expounded more astutely and subtly by following the Vajrayana teaching. The word “pure” here refers to a state that is none other than the union of emptiness and clarity, utterly free from any defilement of mental afflictions and suffering. To arrive at such a state is the practice of purifying one’s mind.

Without hearing sufficient Vajrayana teachings in this aspect, people tend to be confused and raise questions. For example, in the first chapter it says that bodhisattvas establish their buddha lands according to sentient beings’ propensities; at another point it says that the Buddha manifests impure land for the sake of inferior sentient beings; and at another point it claims that only when a bodhisattva’s mind becomes pure will the buddha land be pure. Aren’t these statements contradictory?

Actually there are no contradictions at all. Now, let’s suppose that we are dreaming. From the perspective of a dreamer, nothing exists outside of the dream, whether it is what’s being dreamed, the dreamer, or the dreamed places. Upon waking up, the real world immediately comes back. Thus, dream visions appear solely from the mind. Similarly, because we are still trapped in the deluded dream of samsara, we cannot see the true reality of this world. As soon as our obscurations are purified, we will be able to immediately witness a pure land without having to go to any other places. This point will be analyzed further as we go along.

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## An Overview of the Second Chapter 2: Skillful Means

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The second chapter, “Skillful Means”, mainly talks about the expedient means of bodhisattvas. For non-Buddhists, the words “skillful means” are often interpreted as convenient or easy ways to accomplish a task. Indeed, the so-called skillful means in Mahayana teachings embraces all the bodhisattva practices of six paramitas, or the display of great compassion. Its profound meaning is unfathomable and difficult to grasp for ordinary beings.

The skillful means described in this chapter actually refer to the activities of the Elder Vimalakirti who, as a lay person and having mastered the art of skillful means, rendered whatever he did, said or thought of to become the causes of benefiting self and others. This is an incredible feat, on which Master Kuiji elaborated extensively. From the perspective of personal realization, skillful means would require six types of practice such as being compassionate to sentient beings and not forsaking them, staying in samsara while not being tainted by defilements, longing for the wisdom of enlightenment and engaging in diligent practice, and so on; from the perspective of benefiting others, skillful means are to encourage sentient beings to practice generosity, to help sentient beings eliminate their aggressions and enter into Mahayana path, to further mature their mind-streams in the Mahayana path, to cause them to attain liberation, etc. Outwardly, the Elder Vimalakirti appeared to reside in a city and live an ordinary life. However, his qualities and accomplishments, as we’re about to learn in this chapter, were anything but ordinary.

As the lead character of this sutra, it is not until the second chapter that the Elder Vimalakirti starts to appear. This is reminiscent of how a TV sitcom with a dozen episodes unfolds: the key figure is mentioned in name only early on, and later, when momentum has been built up, he pops up with much fanfare. Here, in the second chapter, Vimalakirti makes his grand appearance when the stage is set. But even before that, the sutra has to enumerate his ample qualities first.

Why is this so? Khenpo reiterates his motives for teaching this sutra, one of which relates to lay practitioners who have to juggle family and social responsibilities with spiritual practice. Hence, the chance for them to attain enlightenment is generally perceived as being quite slim. Khenpo thinks this is actually a misguided opinion.

Traditionally to practice the Dharma, the path of renouncing worldly life and entering the monastic order is preferred and highly praised. Still, it must be made clear that the Dharma can also be practiced within the context of a lay lifestyle. If lay practitioners excel, they may outshine the monastics considerably, as vividly illustrated in this sutra from chapters two to twelve. For instance, when Vimalakirti fell ill, the Buddha tried to send an envoy to inquire after his health, but the Buddha's request was politely declined one after the other by his top ten disciples. The reason was that all the disciples felt they were not qualified to make the call. Recounting their previous encounters with Vimalakirti, the disciples described how they were all defeated and intimidated by his sharp realization and superior eloquence. Thus, all the disciples, despite their monastic status, admired and revered deeply the Elder Vimalakirti, a lay practitioner, without reservation.

Here lies the key message of this chapter. First, lay practitioners like Vimalakirti can become highly accomplished; second, monastic practitioners should never look down upon lay practitioners. Remember, many lay individuals have achieved high levels of realization surpassing those of ordained shravakas, and thus they are the worthy objects of respect.

For you lay practitioners, Vimalakirti serves well as a model and reference point for your self-assessment; moreover, inspired by his excellence, you should strive on the Dharma path to attain at least some qualities like his, even though for now you are not yet on par with him. For non-Buddhists, whether having an affinity or revulsion to Buddhism, you can always analyze the doctrine with intellect and wisdom. Do not rely on personal opinions, Khenpo advises, since they can never fare well in such an investigation. Only a reasoning based on unbiased wisdom can be sound and powerful enough to make a convincing conclusion. This is of paramount importance.

When studying this chapter, we need to generate strong faith and trust in the Elder Vimalakirti. He was extremely brilliant, manifesting in whatever way to suit beings and benefit them. His deeds also demonstrate that as long as one is imbued with wisdom and skillful means, all one's activities fall in the domain of spiritual practice.

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### Vimalakirti's Extraordinary Qualities

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**At that time there was within the great city of Vaisali an elder named Vimalakirti. He had already made offerings to immeasurable buddhas, deeply planting the foundation of goodness.**

Vimalakirti lived in Vaisali, one of the six biggest cities in India at the time, and he was recognized as the leading practitioner in the city. He had made offerings to countless buddhas with his body, speech, and mind, exerting his best effort and never becoming weary of it. Therefore, he had deeply planted the foundation of goodness.

In his *All Virtues Are Subsumed Within One Nature*, Chan Master Yongming Yanshou states that bodhisattvas are insatiable in three endeavors: one, insatiable in making offering to buddhas; two, insatiable in learning the Dharma; and three, insatiable in making offering to sanghas. This aptly describes Vimalakirti, as he had made offering to, served, and supported innumerable buddhas for a long time; yet, being not content with it, he continued to engage in numerous relative virtues, lifetime after lifetime.

H.H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was also like that. On the one hand, we can easily infer that in his past lives he must have served countless buddhas and bodhisattvas as well as made offerings and aspirations in front of them. More prominently, in this life he also placed extreme importance on relative virtues of all aspects, big or small. For example, he unceasingly urged his disciples to engage extensively in circumambulation, life release, mantra chanting, offering alms to monastics, and so on. His Holiness often said that a Buddhist worthy of the name will always have a mala held in his or her hand, which is an indication that this Buddhist is constantly engaging in practice, be it deity yoga, earnest confession, or mantra accumulation. Precisely because of his guidance, his lineage students at home or abroad all are keen to gather the accumulation of merits and wisdom, not merely in the aspect of ultimate truth, but also in the aspect of relative truth, performing worldly virtues of body, speech, and mind with all endeavor.

**He had attained forbearance of the non-arising [of dharmas], and his eloquence was unhindered. He disported in the numinous penetrations and had achieved all the dharanis.**

Bodhisattvas train through various stages and paths. After prolonged cultivation, they attain the forbearance of the non-arising of dharmas that all phenomena are without arising and cessation. This is the realization attained by bodhisattvas on the first to eighth bhumi, at which

they have no fear toward the nature of emptiness and readily accept the truth of no birth. When they reach the path of no-more-learning, the state of non-arising is consummated, and not even a trace of the concept of “forbearance” ever remains.

The word “avaivartika” mentioned in sutras such as *The Amitabha Sutra* means the same state as “the forbearance of non-arising of dharmas”. A bodhisattva abiding in such forbearance has established unwavering conviction in the true reality of emptiness. In fact, the Elder Vimalakirti had long arrived at this state, an extraordinarily high level far surpassing those realized at the path of accumulation and the path of joining.

Vimalakirti’s eloquence was unhindered. The quality of eloquence, entailing the ability of verbal expression, debating, as well as wit and intelligence, is a valuable personal asset. Without it, one is awkward in speech and won’t be able to reveal whatever knowledge or wisdom one may possess internally. As a consequence, one’s activity in spreading Dharma and benefiting living beings is severely impeded. However, Vimalakirti could effortlessly convey his Dharma realization to others through eloquent speech, and he always emerged victorious in any debate.

He could manifest various supernatural powers in the presence of dull-witted and faithless beings. In Buddhist tradition, supernatural powers including the five eyes and six forms of clairvoyance are sometimes allowed to display in order to impress dubious spectators. Through exhibiting mystic feats, such as ascending the body into the air, emitting flames, or creating an unearthly sound, the sages create suitable conditions for disseminating the truth and delivering those faithless beings.

Dharani means the sublime power of total recall. Among ordinary folks, there are those who possess an extraordinary capacity to remember things like numbers, the order of poker cards, and so on that have been shown live on TV. However, rather than such frivolous entertainment, Vimalakirti’s dharanis of wisdom was concerned with the essential teachings of all the sutras and shastras.

In some commentaries, the above three qualities are explained from the aspects of Vimalakirti’s speech, body and mind. Unhindered eloquence refers to the quality of his language; numinous powers refers to the quality of his body; dharanis refers to the quality of his mind. So the outstanding qualities of Vimalakirti’s body, speech, and mind are all extolled.

**He has attained fearlessness and subjugated the troubling vengeance of the Maras.**

The Buddha is replete with the qualities of four fearlessnesses and eighteen unshared characteristics; and with his ten powers, he subjugates devils and foes without having to resort to weapons, and the like. Similar qualities were also evident in the Elder Vimalakirti: he always dwelled in the state of utter fearlessness, whether in asserting his own realization, in guiding others to realization, in his own meditation, or in imparting the Dharma to others. Moreover, Vimalakirti had subjugated the troubling vengeance of the four Maras. Indeed, as soon as one realizes the truth of no self, all external devils and foes highlighted by the four Maras are automatically vanquished.

People often dread the phenomena of demonic vengeance and demonic disturbance; in today's society they have manifested as extremist and terrorists. Many terrorist attacks and threats continue to explode worldwide and have elicited serious global concern. Khenpo read that terrorist organizations have developed sophisticated ways to recruit new members, so even though this topic may not be directly related to the subject matter of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, Khenpo nonetheless shares his insights.

The terrorist groups start with a gentle approach. Through digital communication platforms they target the younger generation, those who have no jobs or ideas and who often stay home surfing the Internet, to join them. Obviously the creators of propaganda won't reveal their true colors; rather they paint such a glorified viewpoint such that their organization looks humanizing and gentle, open and welcoming to future recruits. Mesmerized and manipulated, many youths are drawn into the fold of terror; some must even forsake their education. However, once sucked into the organization, they lose their freedom. Many can never go back home.

Few of the foreign recruits manage to be rescued and returned to their home countries, and the seed of hatred sown in them remains a potential hazard. Therefore, young men or women who are at risk of recruitment and radicalization, including university students and job seekers, must exercise extra caution in order to identify this misinformation online. Otherwise, when one is caught in the mire of terrorist group, it will be too late for tears.

***Syrian War: The Brutal Reflection of Human Fallacy and Suffering***

These days, the crisis in Syria has been at the center of global attention. A new battle flares up again on the day of this class, Khenpo feels it's timely to say a few words about this complicated war.

Syria, for thirty years since 1970, was under the rule of an autocratic president, Hafez al-Assad. In 1994, Bassel al-Assad, Hafez's oldest son and his heir apparent, died in a car accident. So Hafez had no choice but to let his second son, Bashar al-Assad, take over his brother's place. Bashar was an ophthalmologist who was then studying in the U.K. with no prior background in politics, military, or economics. He took office in 2000, and not long after, Syria ended up in disarray and the public became discontented, wanting the regime to fall. In 2011, some teenagers painted anti-government graffiti in an act of adolescent defiance. The Assad regime, determined to stamp out what it perceived as a revolutionary spark, arrested fifteen of these boys who were completely brutalized with some fatally wounded.

The incident infuriated the public; protests broke out and spread around the country, escalated by the regime's shooting of civilians to suppress demonstrations. Armed rebel coalitions began to form, and by 2012 the conflict had blown up into a fully-fledged civil war. Moreover, it also mushroomed into a brutal proxy war that has drawn in regional and world powers: The Russian force backs the Assad regime and has launched air campaigns against the rebels; the United States supports some of the rebels with weapons and other types of reinforcement; Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other countries have also gotten involved to various degrees.

Conflicts in Syria also facilitated the rise of ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). This extremist terrorist organization had been well trained in military and intelligence operations under the Iraqi military wing of Saddam Hussein, and later, it became an al-Qaeda affiliate in Iraq. When Syria's protests descended into a violent insurgent movement, the group exploited the situation to establish bases in Syria and has rapidly expanded its territory and control; rebranded itself as ISIL, it continues to horrify the world by beheading prisoners and other atrocities.

The fabric of Syrian society has been torn into three main divisions, one being the Assad regime propped up by Russia, the other the moderate rebel group aided by United States, and the third, ISIL. Wars continue to rage among them as well as within sectarian factions, at times locked in bloody stalemates.



The war in Syria is causing profound effects beyond the country's borders; world leaders are following it closely and many are deliberating how to intervene. But their decisions will be shaped by complex factors of personal interest, grievances, conciliation, diplomacy, and other hidden agendas.

The Syria war so far has been called the worst humanitarian crisis of our time and civilians have suffered the most—more than 11 million Syrians have been killed or forced to flee their homes. The plight of massive numbers of Syrian refugees screams for international compassionate action, yet humanitarian aid is still very limited. From the perspective of the law of causality expounded in Buddhism, such calamities, wretched as they are, may be inferred as a ramification of a collective karma of having slaughtered the innocent in the past. But, by all means, global communities must rise up and collectively focus on healing the wounds of war in Syria.

The above is Khenpo's side discussion concerning the current situation of Syria. Khenpo tries to keep up with current events, not only those of the East but also the West. In his opinion, it makes more sense to care about worldly affairs than to worry about trifles.

In a sense, pervasive suffering on Earth actually underscores the spirit of all-encompassing loving kindness and compassion of Buddhism. When confronted with enmity, Buddhism does not advocate subjugation by force; rather, it will employ skillful means to pacify aggression and lead beings to the sublime state of liberation. Such are the unique features of Buddhism in taming and helping living beings.

In everyday life, we are bound to encounter various harm and misfortune. If during these occasions we call upon bodhisattvas and abide in their presence, many demonic disturbances will vanish on their own. This method is also applicable to smooth out obstacles on the spiritual journey.

Two root causes are to blame for human sufferings: One is the clinging to an "I," and the other the non-recognition of emptiness. As long as we believe in a self and invest things with true existence, fear and suffering will ensue. Take the example of a worldly business you engage in: If you're overly worried and fixated on the outcome of it, you will become compulsively neurotic, which actually allows hordes of demonic influences to take over you. On the other hand, if you have genuinely realized that all external phenomena are insubstantial and that your

sense faculties are likewise illusory, your sufferings and afflictions will vanish the moment you let go of your attachments and obsession. In addition, negative forces will fizzle out.

**Entering into [all the] gates of profound Dharma, he was excellent at the perfection of wisdom. Having penetrated skillful means, his great vows had been accomplished. Understanding the tendencies of the minds of sentient beings, he was also able to discriminate between those of sharp and dull faculties.**

Vimalakirti had mastered the profound empty nature of reality, and realized the transcendental wisdom of the selflessness of persons and the selflessness of phenomena. Speaking from the ultimate sense, Vimalakirti had penetrated the truth of all phenomena. From the relative sense, his insight into the absolute nature made him an adept of all expedient means, including the six paramitas from generosity to wisdom. The great aspirations he made in countless past lifetimes were all fulfilled without exception, just like Buddha Amitabha's accomplishment of his forty-eight vows and Medicine Buddha's twelve vows. In short, Vimalakirti had perfected his roots of virtues from both ultimate and relative perspectives.

Vimalakirti understood the tendencies of the minds of sentient beings. In both the Tibetan and Xuanzang's version, **tendencies of the minds** are translated as "mind and conduct". Since conduct is always determined by mind, the tendencies of the minds can be interpreted in these two aspects. Vimalakirti could clearly discern others' minds and conduct, such as their likes and dislikes, their virtuous and non-virtuous thoughts, and their purpose of certain behaviors.

Vimalakirti was also able to discern those of sharp and dull faculties. Usually, it's not easy for us to judge people from their outward bearing. For instance, earlier on we may have regarded someone as having sharp faculties, yet such "sharpness" turns out to be devious in that, when gaining strength, it will have a devastating potential to undermine Buddhism. Conversely, someone we deem dull-witted may, after a while, surprises us with his or her profound faith and enlightening wisdom. Then we end up asking ourselves: "Wow, that person has some talent after all. How could I not have seen it in the first place?"

Indeed, lacking the ability to read the minds of others, we often see that a prospect for whom we have high hopes ends up being a total failure in benefiting beings and spreading the Dharma; while a person we ignore or pass over becomes impressive overnight, demonstrating remarkable achievement. Vimalakirti never knew such embarrassment, since he had a thorough understanding of beings' abilities, motives and behaviors, as well as their sharp or dull

faculties. Moreover, as mentioned in the Tibetan translation, Vimalakirti could give the Dharma teaching appropriately to each being according to the individual's capacity.

**Long [a practitioner of] the path of buddhahood, his mind was already pure, and he was definitively [dedicated to] the Mahayana.**

During countless lifetimes, Vimalakirti had been a practitioner of the Buddha path and abided in a realized state. His mind was completely tamed and spotless and could handle any situation with great finesse. Today, for some laities and monastics, they are like a mango fruit that is ripe outside but raw inside, that is, even if they appear to be veteran Buddhists, their minds are still untamed. Even having taken monastic orders for years, a monastic can still succumb to raging hatred and evil deeds.

Therefore, one must authentically dwell in the way of the Dharma to pacify the mind. Khenpo knows a number of elder Tibetans whose lives have been wholly dedicated to the Dharma. Immersing in practices without caring about money or fame, they live in anonymity and are the unsung heroes of the path, from whom we self-proclaimed experts trail miles behind.

As to **definitively dedicated to the Mahayana**, the Tibetan translation interprets that Vimalakirti had grasped and energetically applied the Mahayana teachings. The *Abhidharmakosa* says that the nature of some people is indecisive and sways between Hinayana and Mahayana, while some others are decisively inclined toward Mahayana. Since Vimalakirti was conversant with the Mahayana's essence of bodhichitta, he definitely was an heir of this lineage.

Khenpo here advises the audiences to remain steadfast in their spiritual pursuit. Those having taken refuge in Mahayana Buddhism, especially, must vow to stick to their commitments lifetime after lifetime, come what may. Or if this is too difficult for someone, at least one should swear that within this very lifetime one would never fall away from the Mahayana faith. Actually, our inclination toward a certain lineage reflects the ripening of our past vows made before buddhas and bodhisattvas. Thus it is essential that we continue to reaffirm our aspirations on a daily basis, otherwise we are at risk of giving up halfway.

Even at Larung Gar, there have been people who quit but who, in the beginning, displayed extreme assiduousness that was utterly impressive. However, their enthusiasm later sank into oblivion, which makes Khenpo feel sad or even disturbed.

We must uphold our Mahayana lineage and not regress in spiritual pursuits. Moreover, Khenpo cautions us to refrain from switching between teachers and practices, or we may return empty-handed. Khenpo never pressures students to follow certain teachers or lineages, but emphasizes finding and relying persistently on authentic gurus and pure Dharma. These are the crucial issues.

**He considered well the activities of the realms of existence, and, residing in the department of the Buddha, his mind was great as the ocean.**

Regardless of worldly or spiritual matters, Vimalakirti always sought wisdom for guidelines. He acted only after having investigated carefully with intelligence, instead of being wavered by others' opinions and committing reckless actions.

It is prudent that we do not conduct ourselves in a reckless way. Never make impulsive decisions upon some news; otherwise, dire consequences may befall, like the recruits mentioned earlier who were drawn into terrorism. Indeed, some overseas Chinese students have naively believed rumors that such and such place is heaven for making money, and belatedly find themselves in hazardous traps. Their stories are quite lamentable.

It is now an era of restless mentality when people always indulge themselves in devious entertainment. As practitioners, we need to ascertain if a diversion bears any value. Moreover, modern people are bombarded with constant commercial ads and junk news. We must be cautious about being open to them or not, otherwise we run the risk of wasting our lives consuming rubbish.

Vimalakirti resided in the department of the Buddha; his bearing while walking, sitting, or lying down was in accordance with the Dharma. As a layperson, Vimalakirti's deportment was well polished, reserved, and dignified like those fully ordained monks who observed the two hundred and fifty precepts.

Vimalakirti's mind was like an ocean, vast, deep, and unfathomable. On the contrary, our minds are narrow, closed, and temperamental; our moods are like the whimsical spring weather bright at one moment and downcast the next even at the slightest provocation. Undermined by our karmic forces and chance influences, we often become distressed for no apparent reason, which is no fun at all. Thus we need to foster an ocean-like mind, inclusive and open, and at the same time not relinquishing our precepts and vows.

According to Kumarajiva, the ocean is said to have three sets of qualities: first, its immense depth and breadth; second, its pure nature of not being contaminated by dead body; and third, its abundant treasure trove. The mind of an adept Dharma practitioner is just as deep as it is broad. Allowing no room for illusory defilements to arise, it is spotless and naturally endowed with the immaculate qualities of the fruition stage. Therefore, the great ocean is a fitting analogy to describe the mind of an enlightened being.

At present, we as ordinary beings cannot match Vimalakirti's state of realization. Yet, at least we can make positive, transformative changes in our minds and deeds through the three wisdom tools of listening, contemplation, and meditation. Slowly, we cast off being miserly, capricious or bellicose toward our close ones or strangers, and stop bring mounting misery to others and ourselves. Meanwhile, we immerse ourselves in the great joyfulness of the Dharma. Many eminent masters, despite of their own illnesses or other personal sufferings, maintain their amicable and gracious dispositions, rendering whoever comes into contact with them peace, bliss, and a kind of unspeakable blessing. Isn't it wonderful!

**The buddhas praised him [as their] disciple, and the Indras, Brahmas, and world lords revered him.**

The Tibetan translation doesn't mention **disciple**, just saying that the buddhas all praised Vimalakirti. **World lords** means world protectors, such as the Four Great Deva Kings, or the Twelve Heavenly Generals depicted in *The Sutra of the Medicine Buddha*.

Vimalakirti's qualities were indeed peerless: First, he possessed sublime qualities rarely found in ordinary laypeople; second, he was skilled in attuning himself to sentient beings' needs, which is an ability we commoners can aspire to achieve; third, he arose to great prominence that commanded the respect of humans and gods. Here the text states that Vimalakirti was revered and extolled by Indra, Brahma, the Four Great Deva Kings, and scores of other worldly protectors.

If one acts according to the Dharma and thinks often of cherishing beings, then this person will be praised by the buddhas of ten directions. Whereas, if one is ill-willed and acts perversely by harm living beings, then not only will this person be denounced by worldly people but will also be scolded by all the buddhas.

For instance, our guru Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche urged us time again to refrain from taking life. In a recorded video teaching, he likened the slaughterhouse to a living hell and admonished the horrendous negative karma committed therein. We walked away from the teaching with an apprehension that one would be better off to die soon than to continue living plagued with the heavy karma of killing every day.

As Dharma practitioners, even though we have not made satisfactory progresses, if we can refrain from killing with our own hand or from killing indirectly, such as by ordering a live being to be cooked at restaurants, we have at least eradicated a major non-virtue. In fact, observing merely one precept of not taking life wins the praise of buddhas and bodhisattvas, because they always cherish sentient beings the most. When living beings are mutilated and experiencing suffering, it pains them to no end. Thus if a person abstains from killing, all buddhas and bodhisattvas will be joyous.

In teaching the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, Khenpo often describes the qualities of Vimalakirti and then refers back to our own. Such a teaching style is less rigid than delivering a formal shastra. It is Khenpo's hope that the audiences will make some positive changes in their minds by constantly reflecting upon their own situations. For instance, compared with Vimalakirti, think: What good qualities do I have or do not have? How do I make an effort to cultivate those I don't have?

**Wanting to save people, [Vimalakirti] used his excellent skillful means to reside in Vaisali, ...**

In order to help living beings with his skillful means, Vimalakirti chose to live in the great city of Vaisali. Had Vimalakirti desired a heavenly way of life, he wouldn't have any problem picking any godly realm to live there. But he had set his heart on humans; thus he came to our world to benefit living beings in expedient ways.

Khenpo illustrates skillful means by comparing the vows of individual liberation (pratimoksha) and the vows of bodhisattva. In the pratimoksha setting, non-virtuous behaviors such as killing and stealing are flatly prohibited. The bodhisattva vows, on the other hand, focus more on living beings' welfare: On the premise of not committing the root downfalls, one is allowed to act in ways that run counter to the pratimoksha vows. Even in the pratimoksha setting, lying is permitted in some special cases. For example, you see a deer being chased by a hunter. In order to save this deer's life, you can choose to lie to the hunter that you haven't seen it. This won't

break your pratimoksha vow. Then in the Mahayana setting, more strictly, if you tell the truth without protecting the deer, then you indeed violate the bodhisattva vows. Thus, what action is permitted or forbidden varies in the context of different vows.

This sutra devotes a good portion on how Vimalakirti deftly applied skillful means, and Khenpo encourages us to emulate Vimalakirti so that we may also effectively help others by assuming different roles.

## Lecture 10

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### The Proper Attitude of Studying the Sutra

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Before the teaching, Khenpo mentioned that during his preparation for this teaching on the *Vimalakirti Sutra* in 2017, he compared the Tibetan translation version with Kumarajiva's version. When reading through the text, sometimes he was so moved by the story, and sometimes he felt ecstatic with the profound teaching. He repeatedly thought that if there was any opportunity to teach this sutra even once in this life, it would greatly benefit both himself and the audience. Such a great sutra had been studied generation after generation in history, and now in this modern world, its incalculable values will surely benefit different groups of people, either Buddhists or non-Buddhists, Westerners or Easterners.

Although every time during the teaching Khenpo is surrounded by monastics at Larung Gar, the majority of the current audience are lay practitioners from all over the world. Khenpo wishes that everyone should receive the teaching with a cherishing and joyous mind. As always, if one is highly interested in doing something, then any difficulty that may happen during the procedure can be easily overcome.

The second chapter, *Skillful Means*, talks about Vimalakirti's various qualities and his dharma activities. It provides clear answers to many questions that may arise in various situations in our daily life. Such teachings can eliminate many misunderstandings of non-Buddhists towards Buddhism. As Buddhists, it is also quite necessary to study these teachings in order to dispel their doubts and wrong views in regards to certain Mahayana behaviors.

Specifically speaking, many people tend to think that Buddhism is all about letting go of everything, going into solitude, wearing shabby clothes, and living an ascetic life. Actually it is not necessarily true. Even from the perspective of the Pratimoksha vows, monastics are allowed to live a luxurious life such as wearing expensive robes, living in magnificent houses, and enjoying delicate food, as long as they observe pure precepts and keep a sincere mind of renunciation. Therefore, it is hard for us to make any judgment based on someone's external behavior. We do need to cultivate pure perception in such a situation.

Bodhisattvas' behaviors are even more unfathomable. If we are not able to understand or accept them, we should not deem them as not aligning with the Dharma and hastily slander, refute, or



spread bad words about them. This is absolutely not reasonable. Today some Buddhists have accumulated severe negative karma by criticizing others in writing or verbally, which is quite sad. Therefore, it is essential for us to deepen our knowledge about bodhisattvas' great qualities and skillful means. It will be so great if we can follow the steps of Vimalakirti to benefit sentient beings, yet we need to avoid overdoing it. Before reaching a high level of realization, we need to pay close attention to our current situation and tame our own mental afflictions. If troubled by any defilement arising from self-attachment, we need to conduct ourselves according to the Pratimoksha vows. This is fairly safe and hazard free. Otherwise, without any attainment of the realization of the true reality, while behaving in a way of not differentiating good and bad, virtuous and non-virtuous, such contradiction between a practitioner's view and conduct will lead him or her to descend to the three lower realms and experience tremendous sufferings.

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### Vimalakirti's Dharma Activities

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**where with wealth immeasurable he attracted the poor, with the purity of his morality he attracted the miscreants, with the moderation of his forbearance he attracted the angry, with great exertion he attracted the indolent, with single-minded concentration he attracted the perturbed, and with definitive wisdom he attracted the foolish.**

Vimalakirti attracted sentient beings through the practices of six paramitas. "Attracting" here means benefiting others through the skillful means of the six paramitas, or setting himself as an example in these six aspects and encouraging others to follow his practices. Vimalakirti's ample merit brought him inexhaustible prosperity. Most people have wisdom but lack wealth; others have wealth but not wisdom; Vimalakirti is endowed with both, which is utterly rare. However, instead of indulging in his good fortune, he made vast offerings to sustain the poor and wretched.

Vimalakirti observed all the disciplines, and was completely untainted by naturally negative acts and downfalls that violate the Buddha's edicts. Meanwhile, he protected and corrected those who broke the precepts without despising or deserting them, since they were actually quite pitiable themselves.

Through his forbearance, Vimalakirti tamed his own three doors of body, speech, and mind, and also attracted and tamed sentient beings tormented by jealousy, malice, and aggression.

That is, bodhisattvas not only practice patience themselves, but also strive to reconcile beings overwhelmed by intense rage and narrow-mindedness.

Vimalakirti was ablaze with extraordinary energy when it came to helping others, especially in inspiring those who were lazy, indolent, and wasting their lives aimlessly. He practiced the paramita of concentration, and rested his mind one-pointedly in the union of Shamata and Vipassana. Meanwhile, he tamed beings who were restless, distracted, or easily troubled by dullness and agitation. He ascertained emptiness with his wisdom and guided many ignorant and deluded beings with his insights on the selflessness of persons and of phenomena.

Following Vimalakirti's footsteps, we shall apply whatever tiny level of the six paramitas we have realized to help sentient beings. When our pocket is full, we make donations; when our vows are firm, we lead lost beings onto the right track; the same goes with the paramitas of patience, diligence, concentration, and wisdom. This kind of altruism is what an heir of the Mahayana lineage cannot do without. We shall deem cultivating ourselves extensively and helping others unceasingly as our premier aspiration and objective.

**Although he was a white-robed [layman], he maintained the pure Vinaya conduct of a sramana; although he resided in the home, he was not attached to the triple world. He manifested the existence of wife and sons, but always cultivated chastity. He revealed the existence of subordinates, but always enjoyed transcendence.**

Vimalakirti was a layman wearing a white robe. Indian lay people have this tradition of wearing white robes. Although a part of the laity, he upheld all of the vows meant for fully ordained monastics, even more impeccably than some of them did. Today, many lay individuals, despite of their heavy worldly responsibilities of families and jobs, still manage to keep their vows such as the Five Precepts, the Eight Precepts, as well as the refuge vows. Khenpo has met many such conscientious lay people of both Han and Tibet whose excellent conduct humbles even veteran monastics.

Vimalakirti lived at home, but unlike other householders who cling to their own families, jobs, and worldly pleasures, he never craved fame, status, or wealth; nor was he entrapped in the bliss of meditative absorption of the form realm or of the formless realm. He really distinguished himself as a pure lay practitioner. Ordinary folks carry with them endless lists of worries about kids, relationships, careers, looks, wrinkles, fame, and whatnot; the only

exception that they do not worry about, Khenpo half-jokingly said, may be their own spiritual practice!

Vimalakirti was married and had children and, according to the Tibetan version, may have kept concubines. Although he lived a seemingly mundane family life, he was diligent in his practice of pure living. As mentioned in *Ascertainment of the Three Types of Vows*, a chaste layperson refers to a lay practitioner who keeps all the five root precepts and remains celibate as the monastics do.

In Tibetan history, there have been tantric practitioners who observed strict precepts. However, in order to create favorable conditions for their Dharma activities, they may follow a typical lifestyle with consorts, children, and possessions. For example, Saraha, who is the teacher of Nagarjuna, Padmasambhava, the first and the second Dudjom Rinpoche, as well as Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche all appeared to have spiritual consorts. Yet, they were never tainted by defilements and, with inconceivable realization, actualized immense enlightened activities. In the Han area there were similar cases. Kumarajiva, for example, during his later years displayed secret conduct seemingly unacceptable for commoners; however, his spiritual attainment defies description.

As the head of the family, Vimalakirti must have been surrounded by kin and attendants all the time, yet he was always delighted in withdrawing from them and staying in solitude. Outwardly, great accomplished practitioners have acted in ways that conform to or contradict with those of ordinary practitioners. When examining spiritual guides or our own practice, we should bear in mind that Buddhists share the commonality of the world in the way that they are attuned to how other beings are but not succumbed to their way.

In describing the qualities of authentic teachers, *Finding Comfort and Ease in the Nature of Mind* states that great masters follow traditional standards of conduct on the one hand, but on the other hand they act in a nonconforming manner. This is because if they were exactly the same as ordinary beings, they would lose their spiritual practice, and if they were entirely different, they couldn't relate to others and benefit them. Therefore, spiritual approaches need to strike a balance.

**Although his clothing was richly decorated, it was with the marks and features [of a Tathagata] that he adorned his body.**

As part of the social elite of his time, Vimalakirti was smartly dressed and elegantly ornamented. Yet his true adornment was not his finery and jewelry but rather his outer appearance featured by the auspicious marks and signs that reflected his inner profound realization.

There has been a notion that Buddhists need not pay attention to their looks or clothing. This is actually wrong, Khenpo says. Although we shouldn't waste time and energy to overly dress ourselves up, we need to present an image that is poised, polished, and prepared. For monastics, this is to wear clean robes gracefully. Khenpo gave an example of the lama who used to live next to him. Every time when attending feast offerings or dharma assemblies, that lama would put on a freshly new yellow robe with sheepskin underclothes. Likewise, lay people should take care to look their best, which means grooming well and wearing proper outfits and accessories. This will project a confident personality and help Buddhists to make a good impression on others.

Wearing ornaments of gold, silver, and so on has been considered as a sign of good luck and prosperity since ancient times. Buddhism doesn't forbid wearing ornaments. Although Shakyamuni Buddha in statues and paintings appears in plain robes only; sambhogakaya deities such as Avalokiteshvara and Manjushri are richly adorned with the thirteen ornaments of a perfect sambhogakaya—the five silk garments and eight jewels. Besides having deep symbolic meanings, these adornments also enhance beauty and attract living beings. Interestingly, the depiction of buddhas and bodhisattvas are influenced by regional culture and aesthetics such that they appeal and delight people in that area. For instance, the images of buddhas and bodhisattvas look different in China and India, as they reflect regional flavors. Also, some scholars notice that in certain Afghan areas, high officials wear a type of hat which shape is typically similar to Padmasambhava's hat. They believe that it is because Padmasambhava was born there and this tradition has been kept till today.

As lay Buddhists, we need not act impulsively to give away all of our jewels and belongings and end up living and looking like beggars, which can only prompt negative images to those entering the Buddhist path. If we are well off, we can enjoy wealth unapologetically and be agreeable to sentient beings; at the same time, we should be fully aware that all compounded things are inevitably changeable, empty, and the very source of suffering. Since there is nothing stable and permanent in this conditioned phenomenal world, it is better for us to release our clinging to anything and just take the things as they are.

**Although he drank and ate, the joy of concentration was his [favorite] flavor. If he went to gambling houses or theaters it was only to save people.**

Although Vimalakirti could enjoy all kinds of exquisite delicacies, he had no attachment to them. What he truly savored was the joy of meditation, the fundamental sustenance to him. People are fussy about eating well, and these days they can't wait to share photographs of their fancy food through social media. Connoisseurs of spiritual quests like Vimalakirti are free from such gastronomical afflictions. In fact, a daily recitation before meals in Han monasteries includes the line: "I shall take meditative bliss as my sustenance."

Vimalakirti also frequented gambling parlors and public places of entertainment. It was not because he took pleasure in such pastimes; rather, he felt a need to make connections with beings mired in those places and to educate them. Some eminent masters today, without concern for being misjudged, also adopt such an approach solely for bringing enlightenment to all sorts of beings.

Khenpo recounts that during an overseas trip he had to pass by a casino to go to his hotel room. Many gamblers would look askance at Khenpo and he himself felt uncomfortable and self-conscious. In contrast, true bodhisattvas can enter dubious places courageously without inhibition, since they have realized the ultimate truth of non-duality, and they are completely free from self-attachment and any clinging to the external world.

*All Virtues Are Subsumed Into One* illustrates how the "similar in deed" of bodhisattva's four means of attracting sentient beings is exercised. Bodhisattvas may choose to keep company with thieves, butchers, or prostitutes; by acting in similar ways and winning their trust first, they succeed in guiding these beings on to the Dharma path. Thus, bodhisattvas can skillfully employ a full range of methods to help others by venturing into all different places. Eminent masters of the past often demonstrated this kind of uncommon activity, and so did Vimalakirti.

**He hosted those of the heretic paths without breaking his correct faith. Although he illuminated the profane classics he always took pleasure in the Buddha-Dharma.**

Vimalakirti listened to the doctrines of other religions and theories, yet his own faith maintained intact. Today, some Buddhists who hardly have a firm view themselves purposely dabble in other schools, only end up becoming one of them. It is mainly because they have

neglected to build a solid foundation first, which renders them vulnerable to persuasions and losing their judgment between right and wrong.

Though Vimalakirti knew worldly classics, he always took joy in the Buddha Dharma. He was well versed in all knowledge fields of the world, for instance the five sciences listed in *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*—science of language, science of logic, science of medicine, science of fine arts and crafts, and science of spirituality. Did such erudition cause Vimalakirti's view on Buddhism to die out? Absolutely not.

Today, benefiting sentient beings also entails an understanding of worldly knowledge, or else we will be ill-prepared to face the challenges particular in our current high-tech society. Monastics ordained at a young age and raised in the monastery may be well trained in the Tripitaka but not possess much worldly intelligence. Tibetans living in rural areas also suffer from having a limited outlook. When such individuals leave their familiar setting, they run the risk of getting mired in material lures, often with the sad ending of losing faith and accomplishing nothing.

Some worldly classics are branded as heretic paths, but they may have practical values. For example, India's four Vedas covers the knowledge of various fields, such as medicine, fortune telling, divination, military strategy, and their regimens for preserving health are attractive even to modern people.

In Chinese history, Master Huiyuan of the Eastern Jin Dynasty was proficient in nine major philosophical schools of China. However, when he heard the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* expounded by Master Dao'an, he was struck by the sheer profundity of this sutra and instantly denounced the nine major philosophical schools as worthless stuff. This sudden revelation is the awakening of his previous propensities and virtue. The *Four Hundred Verses on Middle Way* advises that if one has doubts about the Buddhadharma, one should start the study on emptiness first, which will lead to a deeper understanding of the Dharma.

In theory, masters like Huiyuan regarded secular books and theories as tasteless and worthless when compared with the Dharma teaching. However, in a practical sense to help sentient beings, we need to pay attention to the games the world plays. Meanwhile, like Vimalakirti, we should remain steadfast in our own view and faith.

**He was revered by all as the one most worthy of offerings.**

Everyone who met Vimalakirti revered him and made offerings to him. Zhiqian's version states the same, while Xuanzang's translation says that he was admired and showered with gifts because of his excellent teachings. The Tibetan version reads that he mixed in all crowds, and was regarded most worthy of respect and offerings. Despite minor discrepancies, two common aspects emerge: first, Vimalakirti's presence brought joy to humans and gods without pretense, and such a rare knack was an outflow of his inner realization; second, he got along well with everyone, a quality we practitioners must reflect upon ourselves.

This touches upon the reasons Khenpo decided to teach this sutra, one of which concerns the aloof attitude of some Buddhists: They associate with only one or two close friends while remaining apathetic or at odds with others. Khenpo considers this a significant mistake contradictory to the Mahayana way that takes no preference between friends and foes. It is terrible if one is downright incapable of connecting with beings according to their inclinations.

In the attempt to spread the Dharma, don't overdo it, unless you want to turn your prospects off and confuse them. Khenpo says that the renowned contemporary spiritual teacher Nan Huai-Chin was wary about unsolicited proselytizing of any sort. Once, a group of Christians came to his house preaching to him nonstop for two hours. Finally, he was compelled to hand them a note saying: "God says you shall not disturb other's tranquility." Only then did they leave. Similarly, Buddhists should not impinge on others with their own rigid and stubborn mode of operation.

Sure, when we are in like-minded Buddhist groups, Khenpo encourages us to let loose our Buddhist temperament and freely roll out our Buddhist diction, expounding the Middle Way, Buddhist Logics, or whatever. However, in a non-Dharma setting, we need to act more reservedly. A case in point is using a prayer wheel: At Larung Gar, it is a common and even required activity, but when using it blatantly in a public place that does not identify with Buddhism, you will only invite disapproval or criticism.

In all, we should avoid becoming a helpless formalist or a fanatical preacher. As we are sharing this Earth with many other beings, we need to align ourselves with the norm. Adhere always to the basic principles and try our best not to deviate from them. In extreme cases, we can seek special permission when needed, as long as we do not violate root vows.

**In supporting the correct Dharma he attracted both old and young.**

The “correct Dharma” here is to be understood from the mundane point of view that includes the social code of conduct and its ramifications. Vimalakirti embraced and upheld the worldly rules himself, and gave guidance to both old and young. In the Tibetan version, this includes three age groups: the elders, those of middle age, and the young.

We should aspire to introduce the Dharma to people of all ages and backgrounds in ways that is beneficial and suitable for each group. It is important to cultivate a “*Can Do*” spirit, instead of harboring a cowardly mentality with tunnel vision. Remember, by opening our minds, we generate great aspirations, which will endow us with great strength! The sun and moon and their symbols are our excellent examples. Their radiance shines forth on everything; our aspiration shall be likewise pervasive: “I vow to benefit all sentient beings. Even if I cannot accomplish much in this life, I’ll continue in all lives to come. Even if I can help merely one living being, I shall spare no effort in it still!”

**In all of his business dealings, although he made worldly profits he never took joy in them.**

Vimalakirti was astute in business enterprises and had easily reaped profits. Yet he placed no importance in wealth and other worldly blessings. To him, business opportunities were merely a tool to support his real vocation of cherishing living beings. He clearly saw the harm in hoarding money, as stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*,

*For those distracted by their love of wealth*

*There is no chance for freedom from the sorrows of existence.*

Wealth makes people distracted and renders their liberation out of reach. Thus we should not painstakingly grasp worldly wealth and look for our joy in it. On the other hand, there is no prohibition to embrace prosperity that comes our way. Some Buddhists have misgivings about launching a business career, worrying it may infringe on their Buddhist status. Actually, Buddhism does not forbid making money as long as it is earned by a conscientious livelihood that causes no harm to other living things.

For lay people, gaining affluence and financial security are deemed appropriate. Tremendous merit can be generated if wealth is offered to the welfare of the monastics. Khenpo mentions one such merit field is providing medical and pension funds for aging monks and nuns at Larung Gar, who otherwise would have no resources to cover these expenses. Within lay practitioner groups, the well-off lay people should help out those having difficulty to make



ends meet. In this way, lay practitioners can maintain their own sangha community in a long term. Because nobody can take their wealth with them at death's bed, it's essential to share the resources with others who need them.

For monastics, it is also essential to undertake volunteer jobs within the sangha to sustain themselves. In this way, there is no harm for them to use the resources of the Three Jewels. According to the Chan tradition in Han Buddhism, if an ordained person does not work for one day, then he would not receive any alms during that day.

**In wandering the crossroads, he dispenses benefits to sentient beings.**

While walking in the crossroads, Vimalakirti never failed to convert others to the Dharma. Xuanzang translated "crossroads" as "cities", meaning Vimalakirti traveled to various big cities in order to educate people there. Khenpo said, he would also like to learn from Vimalakirti to travel more around the world and make auspicious connections with different people.

## Lecture 11

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### The Importance of Skillful Means

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There is abundant knowledge in the *Vimalakirti Sutra* that is worth studying. More importantly, we should not only study it but live by it. We do need to take the teachings in this sutra as a guidance for our life rather than as pure knowledge. In this chapter, we have talked about how Vimalakirti benefited all beings with many skillful methods. Actually, having skillful means is indispensably needed when one tries to achieve anything, be it worldly affairs or any Buddhist activity such as personal practice or the spreading the Dharma to benefit others. When adding the touch of skillful means, we can accomplish everything smoothly; otherwise, we may encounter obstacles at the very beginning, struggle a lot during the middle, and end up with a result that is less than satisfactory. Basically, everything we do should be first examined and analyzed carefully in order to establish its feasibility; then we should build a strong determination, which implies never to waver but to persevere and carry through. This is a principle that every wise person should have.

The main purpose of listening to and reflecting upon the Dharma teaching lies in two aspects. The first is to tame our mental afflictions and maintain a purified mind. The other is to benefit all sentient beings as much as we can in our lifetime. We should apply the Mahayana teachings to our actions and start from the smallest altruistic things we are capable of doing. Altruism is needed by everyone, regardless of nationality, race, and religion. By conducting altruistic actions, temporarily speaking, we can benefit human beings and the society. Ultimately speaking, altruistic actions are the cause of the attainment of Buddhahood.

When engaging in any activity to benefit others, it is necessary to rely upon skillful means. For example, when we are with different groups of people, we convey the Dharma teaching in different ways in accordance to people's different capacities. This requires us to observe beings' intentions, preference, what they need and what they can take, as well as different environmental settings. Sometimes we approach them as superiors, sometimes as equals, sometimes as inferiors, etc. As a matter of fact, there are a lot for us to consider when it comes to providing help to others in a proper way, both physically and spiritually.

A human is the combination of mind and body. We maintain our physical body with material provisions while we nourish our mind with the nutrition of religion and faith to obtain happiness and joy. It is very narrow-sighted to assume that happiness is established upon the basis of objects only and that the ease of mind relies on wealth and nothing more. In fact, people who live in developed countries where material wealth is abundant do not necessarily eradicate their pain and suffering easily. In fact, they can struggle even more than people living in developing countries.

We can examine our own life this way: Has the abundance of material goods and advanced technology eradicated our afflictions? Technologies are highly developed in some countries where people can enjoy their corresponding advantages. However, have these people truly obtained eternal happiness? Not necessarily. More often than not, scientists and people of high ranks suffer more than ordinary ones. Perhaps, people who live in relatively backward areas are happier.

All beings, not only humans but also animals, including ants and worms, hustle and bustle day and night in the pursuit of happiness, but very few can obtain it. Actually, happiness is not that far away. By studying and practicing the Buddha's teaching we can truly have incomparable and eternal happiness, which cannot be obtained through material abundance. We need to study and reflect on this topic and make the wise choices to follow the right path.

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### Vimalakirti's Dharma Activities

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**In entering into the government administration, he safeguarded everyone.**

Vimalakirti participated in government administrations in courts, public prosecutions, juridical departments, and even jails and prisons, etc., as a government officer who created laws and regulations. Some may ask if a Buddhist should get involved in governmental activities where Buddhism does not seem to belong. Vimalakirti thought differently. He took part in law enforcement and in the administrative work of the government in person. He did not do so to earn a big salary or to punish the commoners. What Vimalakirti did was to safeguard everyone with justice and to reduced injustice, mistakes, and veiled dealings in law enforcement. He helped people to enjoy their lawful rights and to obtain equal treatment.

People learning Mahayana Buddhism should use skillful means in this regard. No matter what type of country or district you live in, whether it is a democratic country or not, it is important for Buddhists to get along with government officials and administrators. It is not necessary to completely blend in with them and change your own mindset and belief to conform theirs. In the same way, you do not have to go to the other extreme and refuse to get any close to them. What we should do is to exert friendliness and use our wisdom to help people within the present system. Therefore, it is important to build friendship with the government officials and administrators.

It is also important to extend our care and attention to people who are at the bottom of the social ladder, such as prisoners. Lay practitioners and teachers should give a helping hand and speeches of encouragement in jails and correctional institutions. These inmates are already enduring tough punishment for their wrong deeds. During their terms many inmates worry about their family, especially their children's education. Their families usually suffer from social discrimination. If we can help them, there will be a chance for them to start over. This is also an act of Bodhisattvas.

**In entering into the lecture halls, he led people by means of the Mahayana.**

Not only did Vimalakirti go to government departments, he also went to lecture halls. In ancient India, lecture halls were places hosting debates for people from different religions and schools. The tradition is that the one who has lost the debate must give up his own school and follow the winning one. Vimalakirti often went to such lecture halls and, out of compassion, shared the Mahayana teachings and gradually brought non-Buddhists onto the Mahayana path.

These lecture halls are similar to symposiums, forums and other gatherings of today, where people of different ideologies compare and exchange opinions and learn from each other. If we can use our wisdom and spread the Dharma through this kind of skillful means, virtuous roots could be planted in others, and some may turn to Buddhism and even start to embark on the Mahayana path.

However, nowadays some practitioners hold a rather conservative attitude towards forums. They have very fixed ideas, such as focusing on chanting mantras and finishing the preliminary practice only. While it is necessary to make efforts on personal spiritual practice, it is also important to take our responsibilities as Mahayana practitioners and to promote the Dharma teachings to benefit all beings. With altruistic aspirations we can promote the Dharma teaching

by building Buddhist centers and monasteries in different places. Last year, when I attended a symposium, someone requested me to found an international Buddhism institute. Maybe this is an impossible task, but that was an auspicious suggestion to start with. If we make aspirations, we can gradually lead people into Mahayana teachings through various means.

**In entering the schools, he inspired the children.**

Vimalakirti often went to schools as well, including kindergartens, middle schools and universities, to enlighten and inspire children and youth. It is very important to get engaged in all kinds of beneficial activities, such as the education of traditional culture, charity and the release of captive animals. Meanwhile we should not neglect the study and practice of Dharma. Some practitioners only focus on study and refuse to take part in other activities, while others spend all their time on promoting traditional culture and give up the Dharma study and practice. It is important to keep a balance and not to tread on extreme paths.

Education is mandatory for children. When Prince Siddhartha was young, he was studious. Once he asked his teacher 64 questions, and his teacher could not answer them. Prince Siddhartha was an extraordinary student who had accumulated virtuous roots and wisdom through past lifetimes. Though very unlikely that we will have the opportunity to teach smart students like Prince Siddhartha, we should engage in promoting education with great enthusiasm and consistency. This is a very meaningful cause.

Ten years ago, I set my sights on promoting Chinese traditional culture to young people, especially to children, so that these youngsters could root themselves in a tradition. Now we have the World Youth Buddhist Society and the Ren Culture Society which promote both Chinese traditional culture and Buddhism education. Through these platforms, many young students have learnt a lot and gradually changed their mind.

We should tailor education for the young, the middle-aged, and the old. Here is about the education of the young people. Since they have a long journey ahead, and the future is in their hands, it is crucial to teach them how to be a good person. They should not become the kind of people who are only concerned about money and who have no idea about a good personality. We should inspire them with integrity and honesty through education.

In Western society, people attach much importance to honesty. Once you lie you leave a bad impression and you destroy your own credit. But there are many people in different places who

tend to lie and who do not have any sense of credibility or honesty. Lying and breaking promises become habitual patterns for people because they did not have a good education of morality while growing up. So it is necessary to fortify such education and improve public morality.

Another quality we need is consistency. Some people start doing something with great enthusiasm. They bring up ideas with passion. But after a while, they hit small obstacles and just give up. This is improper. When beginning, we do not have to be overly passionate. Reasoning and caution are necessary. In the middle, we do need to be steady and work step by step, in order to make every step successful and reliable. So the young people, when planning for the future, should have a steady mindset, should be reliable, stable and honest. That is why we should go to school and inspire the children.

**In entering the brothels, he revealed the transgressions [that arise from] desire.**

Vimalakirti was a wealthy and famous lay practitioner and had a big family. But he also went to brothels, which was unusual. Vimalakirti did so not because he was degenerated or without moral values. Actually, he went to brothels to teach people about the transgressions arising from desire. Such places are full of people with strong greed and desire. With skillful means, Vimalakirti gradually let them realize the faults of desire.

Most people, including Westerners, consider brothels dirty and their patrons morally corrupted. People from upper class, such as the president of a country, will scandalize the public if they visit brothels. Weirdly enough, casino gambling is sometimes considered acceptable. In ancient times, brothels were places to socialize for the upper class and the refined scholars. They were socially and culturally acceptable in some traditions and under some reigns. Vimalakirti visited brothels but was not tainted by the transgressions that derive from desires. On the contrary, he liberated many people there from the mires of desire.

There are many stories of ancient Indian Buddhist masters who also took similar actions. In Master Sengzhao's commentary, there is a story of a famous prostitute named Wondrous Golden Light. One day, Wondrous Golden Light was invited to a garden by a merchant's son with the offer of fifty kilograms of gold. At that time, Manjushri knew Wondrous Golden Light was ready for enlightenment. So Manjushri manifested as a gorgeously dressed handsome young man that was even more radiant. Wondrous Golden Light was instantly attracted to him, and left the merchant's son. She asked Manjushri for the beautiful clothes he was wearing.

Manjushri said, “Sure, but you should aspire for bodhichitta first.” Wondrous Golden Light asked: “What is bodhichitta?” Manjushri answered: “Bodhichitta is no other than your body, because they are both empty.”

At that moment, Wondrous Golden Light reached enlightened because she had already listened to the teachings on emptiness in front of Kashyapa Buddha lifetimes ago. She attained the forbearance of non-arising and wished to get ordained. But Manjushri refused and instructed her to go back to the merchant’s son. So she did. While in the garden with the merchant’s son, she dropped down and died. The merchant’s son held her in his arms, completely heartbroken. Very quickly her dead body started to rot and gave out terrible odor. In no time, all that left was a set of skeleton. Witnessing the whole scene, the merchant’s son realized the faults of attachment and desire and experienced a great sense of renunciation. He then went to follow the Buddha and soon attained the forbearance of non-arising. In this story, Wondrous Golden Light did not actually die. Her death was manifested to inspire the merchant’s son.

For those who have heard or practiced emptiness in their past lives, their virtuous roots revive as soon as they encounter the teachings on emptiness again. There are signs for the revival. Just as described in *The Introduction to the Middle Way*, sometimes the hair on their neck stand up and tears gush out for no reason when they hear the teachings on emptiness. A very important verse in the *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* says that if you have doubts about the Dharma, you can dispel them by learning teachings of emptiness:

*Whoever doubts what the Buddha said,  
About that which is hidden,  
Should rely on emptiness,  
And gain conviction in him alone.*

This verse is quite important and we’d better have it memorized. People may have doubts about the concept of samsara, karma, reincarnation, and many others. If one can patiently learn the six treatises on the Middle Way and the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* for a few years, one will firmly believe that since the Buddha could reveal such profound truth of emptiness, then the Buddha must have fathomed those simpler ones like samsara, karma, and reincarnation.

Dharmakirti also states in his *Commentary on Valid Cognition*:

*By knowing what should be adopted and what should not,*

*That is, the cessation of suffering, the suffering and its cause,  
And their skillful means, the path to the cessation of suffering,  
Buddha is recognized as the One with Valid Cognition,  
Yet not for his knowing all the trivial matters.*

In this stanza, “what should be adopted” is the truth of the cessation of suffering, and “what should not” is the truth of suffering and the truth of the cause of suffering. And “skillful means” is the truth of the path to the cessation of suffering. The fact that the Buddha revealed the four noble truths, is proof enough that the Buddha was the one with valid cognition. Buddha did not have to tell us the exact number of leaves of grass on earth to show he had valid cognition. In Tibetan Buddhism, there are quite a few of such teachings to establish that the Buddha has valid cognition. We should deeply reflect on them so that we can cultivate a strong conviction on the Buddha’s teaching.

**In entering the wine shops, he was able to maintain his [good] intention.**

Vimalakirti also went to bars where alcohol was served. Some Chinese commentaries say he went to cabarets where there were many dancers and singers. Did he drink shots and get drunk like others? No, he actually taught the alcoholics to get sober, to be kind and wise and find purpose for future life. He truly wished to benefit people and did not mind the places he frequented.

Most of the Buddhist lay practitioners have taken the vow to abstain from drinking, not to mention monastics. This is really good. But after we have gained certain level of realization, we should also use skillful means to liberate different beings. We can go to these places to mingle with people and try to benefit them. But there is a big risk. As the saying goes, compassion without wisdom can bring trouble, while skillful means without wisdom can be tainted. Before obtaining some realization, we may not be able to draw the thin line between skillful means and improper actions if we blindly copy the unusual actions of great masters. It is no less than playing with fire if our mind is tainted with afflictions, while we are unaware of them, and thinking we are using skillful means. Remember, only true Bodhisattvas are qualified to visit such places.

As we know, the ills and error of drinking are taught in many sutras. The *Satyaka-Nirgranthaputra Sutra* says that drinking leads to carelessness, lack of wisdom and poor memory in this life, and reproof from the wise. In the Vinaya teaching, the Buddha said to his



disciples that they should not drink alcohol, not even a drop as small as the dew on grass tips. If they did, the Buddha ceased being their teacher and they were not considered the Buddha's disciples. However, some realized masters, especial those Dzogchen practitioners and great yogis, actually use alcohol to keep themselves vigilant and to abide in the true reality of equality and luminosity. But it is hard to tell whether someone is truly realized or just drunk by their appearance. The intention of a siddha is not easy for an ordinary person to understand. I remember Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was often criticized, especially by those following the common vehicle teachings and holding pure precepts. From their point of view, it is certainly understandable, since drinking obviously breaks the precept. Yet, those whom the common vehicle teachings could not tame and convert, such as the hippies in the West, were very well tamed by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's unusual means.

Once, with a secretive look, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche told his hippie students: Bring your weed and let's have a party. His students were so excited and brought all of their marijuana to the party, thinking that they would have a good time with their guru. During the party, Trungpa Rinpoche took everyone's marijuana and threw them to the fire, saying "This is our self-grasping, this is our greed..." At the time, some students were happy while others were sad, but because of Trungpa Rinpoche's skillful means, they were tamed as capable students.

It is hard to distinguish whether some actions are crazy or skillful means of a guru. We learned "the ten confusions" in *The Precious Garland of Supreme Path* which say that it is easy to confuse realized masters with charlatans. It is really hard to tell whether a person is a realized master or just an ordinary one with unusual actions.

Hence, Vimalakirti often visited those places of dissipation and benefited many sentient beings. We should rejoice at such Bodhisattva activities and aspire to attain the state of no attachment in order to help countless beings engrossed in debauchery. Meanwhile, we should be very careful because without any level of realization, such behaviors are very dangerous. We could get easily turned upside down if we do not have stable mindfulness and vigilance, or if we have not conquered afflictions and are too anxious for success. Therefore, we should always take our actions carefully.

**When he was with the elders, as the most honored of the eminent he explained the excellent Dharma for them.**

Here “elders” refer to distinguished merchants or successful businessmen. When Vimalakirti was with them, he was the most honored, as he taught them wonderful transcendent Dharma. The merchants had strong clinging toward their wealth, and most of time, they only prayed to the God of Wealth to accumulate worldly fortune. They did not care for the transcendent teaching of liberation from samsara. Therefore, Vimalakirti taught them the Dharma of liberation to inspire their renunciation. Vimalakirti maintained a good relationship with the merchants not to make himself wealthy, but to benefit them on the transcendent level.

**When he was among retired scholars as the most honored of the retired scholars he eradicated their attachments.**

Here the “retired scholars” refer to those Buddhists who were not merchants but were fortunate and wealthy. They had strong attachment to their wealth and were unwilling to make offerings or give alms, so Vimalakirti taught them the faults of greed and trained them to cut off greedy attachments and to be more generous and philanthropic.

Vimalakirti was the most honored and highly respected among these rich laypeople. We need to learn from Vimalakirti and get along with any kind of people instead of staying only within our own social circle. For example, we can discuss with businessmen about the stock market, come to rich men’s parties, maintain a good rapport with wine-sellers, with prostitutes, and with people of all walks of life. We do need such skillful means to benefit others, which is one of our main purposes for studying this sutra. Let us see whether we can become less stubborn about who we are, and be more open and flexible through the study. Of course, from the perspective of the Pratimoksa vows, we should keep our precepts pure and be cautious and aware of our behaviors all the time; but from the perspective of Mahayana vows, we need to be flexible, to be able to adjust our actions and speech to different situations, so that we can efficiently benefit sentient beings according to their capacities.

For wealthy people, it is better to make donations before they pass away, because after that, they can no longer enjoy their money anyway. Some Buddhist practitioners may go to the other extreme and give away all their money, including basic allowances, and cause problems in their own life. This is neither sensible nor necessary. We need to carefully plan our livelihood as well.

Nowadays the world changes so fast, no one knows what is going to happen next. The money that you are holding in your hand at this moment could vaporize in the next just because of a

wrong decision. In Chinese, we say “tens of thousands of things change in the blink of an eye”. But now, it seems like in the blink of an eye, millions of things have already changed. So we must think carefully before making any decision.

**When he was among ksatriyas, as the most honored among ksatriyas he taught them forbearance. When he was among brahmans, as the most honored among brahmans he eliminated their arrogance. When he was among the ministers, as the most honored among ministers he taught them the correct Dharma. When he was among princes, as the most honored among princes he instructed them with loyalty and filiality. When he was among palace officials, as the most honored among palace officials he converted the palace women.**

Ksatriyas refers to the second highest social classes in ancient India who was taking the role of governing the country. Vimalakirti had very good relations with them and was revered by them. He taught them how to nurture forbearance, because as kings, rulers or governors, they had to deal with many different voices, criticism, and resistance, and were easy to get angry. So for political leaders, it is important to practice forbearance. Otherwise the objections from different political and academic groups will cause them great pains.

In the *Asoka Sutra*, there is a story about the king Asoka and his spiritual guide, Upagupta. In a small country, Upagupta planned to build more than one hundred monasteries, but the king of that country created a lot of obstacles and the project was halted. Upagupta then went to Asoka for help, since he was the king of a big country. Asoka was very pleased to see him and asked what he could do for him. Upagupta told him about the kind and about the hostile conditions undermining the building of monasteries in that small country. Asoka got very angry and said, “I will kill him right now!” Asoka used to be a tyrannical despot who only started learning to restrain his temper after meeting Upagupta. Upagupta told him, “The reason why I came to see you instead of just sending you a letter is to let you solve the problem without killing.” Then Asoka wrote a letter to the king and sealed it with his bite mark. Due to Asoka’s power, the conflict was easily pacified. So people who have power and influence or who possess a high position should often listen to different voices. It is quite important for them to have patience in such situations.

Brahmans were well-educated elites in the society, and belonged to the highest caste in ancient India. So in order to eliminate their arrogance, Vimalakirti taught them the Dharma. The

ministers executed the king's will and orders and often had to punish people, so Vimalakirti gave them the teaching on holding the principle of justice and selflessness. He was also revered among the princes, and taught them about loyalty and filial respect. In the harem, female officials usually had afflictions, such as jealousy, and were not immune to wrong behaviors. So Vimalakirti corrected their behaviors and converted them.

**When he was among the common people, as the most honored among the common people he had them generate the power of blessings.**

Vimalakirti was also revered among the common people, and helped them accumulate merits. There is a story in Kumarajiva's commentary on this sutra: Once a poor man saw a very rich person who was gorgeously dressed and riding a steed. The poor man said three times "Too bad!" upon seeing him. The rich man was surprised and asked "What is so terrible in my dashing appearance?" The poor man answered, "I'm not saying this to you but to myself! For my lack of merits in my past lives, I am now a poor man and cannot come close to your class! I'm saying this as I am ashamed of myself!"

So just like this story, when we see others with nice cars, luxury houses, and beautiful appearances, instead of feeling jealous, we should remind ourselves to take good actions and accumulate merits. For example, circumambulation is a good way to accumulate merits. In Atisha's biography, it is recorded that once Dromtonpa asked his teacher Atisha, "Why do you circumambulate the stupa everyday instead of doing meditation?" Atisha said: "No other worldly positive action is better than circumambulation. When I circumambulate the stupa, I can accumulate all the merits in terms of body, speech and mind. But meditation can only accumulate the merit in terms of mind. In India, some attained their accomplishments by circumambulating big cities monasteries, stupas, the statue of Avalokitesvara, etc. But you Tibetans pay no attention to such important practice." Dromtonpa then understood the importance of circumambulating stupas, and did so every day. In his later years, although he was in bad health, he still circumambulated the stupa with the help of wheel chair for at least three circles per day.

So Tibetan Buddhism puts great emphasis on circumambulating mandalas, stupas, monasteries, and holy mountains to accumulate merits. Just talking about accumulating merits is surely not enough. It is quite essential to conduct good deeds and accumulate merits through our mind, speech, and body.

## Lecture 12

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### A Reminder of Impermanence

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The teaching of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* was supposed to take a break during the month of July, when Khenpo goes on a scheduled lecture tour overseas. But the travel plan fell through unexpectedly, thus Khenpo is now back in Larung Gar to continue the teaching instead of August. This unforeseen change of schedule, Khenpo points out, is actually a good example of impermanence. In our everyday life, plans rarely catch up with changes—things don't always go as planned. Such is the natural rule of phenomena.

Khenpo figures it will take one or two years to finish the teaching of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. At the onset of this class, he bid the audience to cultivate patience and perseverance. In the past, eminent masters had discoursed on sutras such as *Nirvana Sutra* and *Flower Garland Sutra* for five or even ten years. Many of their audiences also persisted along and received unbroken transmissions. Khenpo says that our task may not be as daunting, but during the recently finished teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*, which took more than one year, many had attended all the sessions from beginning to end. Such a tenacious spirit is commendable. In regard to another extensive teaching, *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*, that has been going on for nearly four years, Khenpo also expects many listeners will have full attendance and obtain a complete transmission.

Khenpo reminds us that before receiving Dharma teachings, we should reflect inwardly and ask ourselves: Why am I listening to the teaching? What's my own purpose for it? Having received the teachings, how should I apply it to benefit beings? Go over this checklist each time and generate the precious bodhichitta. It's best to arouse bodhichitta when leaving your place for the Dharma hall. If not, alert yourself and reorient your mind correctly upon arriving the Dharma hall, or before the teaching commences.

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### The Good Fortune in Receiving Dharma Teachings

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According to the sutra, there are four things that are difficult to encounter: a human birth; a place where the Dharma flourishes; an authentic teacher; and the authentic Dharma teaching.

To be born a human is rare, and taking birth in a place where Dharma flourishes is also difficult, meeting a qualified spiritual mentor is sheer luck, and willing to endeavor in Dharma study is exceptional. Above all, having heard the Mahayana doctrine is doubly difficult.

Now that we have all these favorable circumstances in hand, we must cherish each and every teaching, whether attending it onsite or online. There are remarks that online learning is not as effective as being personally in the Dharma hall. Khenpo suspects this has a lot to do with the listeners' attitude. Often times, online audiences tend to move around ad libitum, engaging in eating or chatting when the teaching is actually in session. Such careless conduct is quite improper and has to be remedied. In all, wherever you are, it's imperative that you listen to the teachings without distraction, and take part in the pre- and post- class recitations. Only by investing in sincere effort will you experience extraordinary blessings and benefits.

The *Lotus Sutra* that had been taught by Khenpo last year is noted for its tremendous blessings, and the *Vimalakirti Sutra* of our current focus is just as powerful. Khenpo is confident that studying this sutra will bring forth positive transformations to many, and those who previously did not know how to tame their minds according to Mahayana Buddhism will get the gist of it this time. In addition, some audiences may vow to emulate Vimalakirti in helping beings with skillful means.

Mahayana Buddhism often extols the three qualities of the Buddha: wisdom, compassion, and power. Wisdom is like the sunlight that dispels sentient being's ignorance; compassion is like the cool moonlight that pacifies raging afflictions of suffering beings and brings them happiness within reach; power is like the earth that, with its distinctive qualities, supports everything and sustains animals and plants with nutrients and vitality. So Khenpo encourages us to make an aspiration: In all my lifetimes, may I attain the qualities of wisdom, compassion, and power; like the sun, moon, and earth, may I serve limitless living beings in the entire universe in an unhindered and unselfish way.

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### A Brief Review of Previous Two Chapters

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Khenpo briefly reviews what has been taught so far: the first chapter "*Buddha Land*" explicates a pure mind leading to a pure buddha field, which also touches upon the "pure perception" of the Vajrayana tenet. The second chapter "*Skillful Means*" illustrates the myriad skillful means

that the Elder Vimalakirti applied in delivering sentient beings, especially how he went about in cities and proficiently connected with all kinds of people. For instance, he imparted profound Dharma to lay practitioners according to their propensities and earned their high respect; when associating with kings, brahmins, or ksatriyas, he was always honored by all of them. When he went to the god realm, the asura realm, or other realms, he was the object of their veneration and offerings.

Khenpo reminds us to internalize the meaning of these teachings, rather than leave it untouched on high shelves. We must not remain intransigent in our daily life. Rather, like Vimalakirti, we should interact with people with ease. By mingling into society and various communities, we can serve others according to their needs. Some monastics are eloquent in teachings and can handle things well at the monastery, but once they leave their comfort zone, to an urban setting for instance, they are at a loss like fish out of water. Often they fall into the extremes of being totally withdrawn or fully caught up in the eight worldly concerns. Neither of them is in accord with Mahayana spirit. Likewise, today many young people have a phobia of taking up the responsibilities of life; when they finally pluck up their courage to do so, they are usually afflicted with mental disorders of depression, anxiety and other difficulties. Even if they have studied some Dharma, they usually fail to apply it to transform problems into spiritual advancement. The reason for such inept attacks is due to the lack of Mahayana's skillful methods—of the style, wisdom, and deftness Vimalakirti possessed. Therefore, we need to cultivate genuine interests in people of all walks of life and learn to have a conversation with them, be they doctors, policemen, spiritual adepts, or beggars.

When practitioners are fully fledged with wisdom and power, they can effortlessly fit into any surroundings: when alone in retreat, they practice the Dharma authentically; when out in the world, they intermingle with various beings harmoniously. If in this life we don't have the causes and conditions to become a monk or a nun, it needs not to be forced; bear in mind that many highly accomplished siddhas in Tibetan Buddhism such as Jigme Lingpa and Jamgon Mipham Rinpoche also manifested as householders whose spiritual accomplishments far surpassed many monastics.

Our lives are always evolving; we simply can't stay in familiar surroundings forever. Therefore, wherever we find ourselves in, be it at the Tibetan plateau, India, or a Western country, we should become familiar with the culture and history of each region, and at the same time retain our own traditional background and keep up with modern knowledge.

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## Vimalakirti's Dharma Activities

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**When he was among Brahma gods, as the most honored of the Brahma gods he taught with superior wisdom.**

Previously, we've learned Vimalakirti went to palaces and brought his audiences to spiritual maturity. Here, when he was among Brahma gods, he received the highest respect and numerous offerings. To them, he taught the superior wisdom related mainly to the profound vipassana. Why is this teaching? It is because brahma gods, despite their mastery of shamatha meditation, lack the vipassana wisdom that realizes the emptiness of self.

We can follow Vimalakirti to expound a specific aspect of Dharma that others lack. For example, a Zen monastery may focus on one approach of meditation but miss other disciplines, which can then be introduced as supplementary teachings for them. Reciting the name Amitabha diligently is excellent, but if the devotees are unfamiliar with the law of karma or the meaning of ultimate truth, a teaching on these will be illuminating to them. On the other hand, Khenpo may also emphasize topics that are in line with the particular sect of a monastery, such as the principle of pure land for Pure Land monasteries, or the Tiantai doctrine for a monastery of Tiantai School. Of course, if people are open to traditions other than their own, Khenpo is willing to confer for their greater benefit.

**When he was among Indras, as the most honored among Indras he manifested impermanence.**

When he was among Indras, Vimalakirti was also loved, most honored, and served by tens of thousands of celestial beings. Dwelling in the desire realm, these gods indulged themselves day and night in endless sensory pleasures that were hard to break away from. Thus Vimalakirti explicated the principle of impermanence, educating them that their enjoyment, sensory pleasures, alluring bliss, melodious music, and fun games were all fleeting and ephemeral.

In our world, privileged individuals who enjoy a comfortable life without any difficulty are actually in great need to hear the teachings on impermanence. Many high government officials and business tycoons reveling in their high position hardly notice the transient nature of life. They believe their satisfactory situations will last forever, and when misfortunes befall on them,



leading to their demise in status, wealth, or looks, they have no way to cope. Thus it is essential to alert them that everything is liable to pass before it's too late.

Khenpo has personally met such so-called successful figures. One of them told Khenpo recently that he had just invested several billion RMB on some business and was planning overseas investment and so on. Hearing this, Khenpo couldn't help thinking, "Life is impermanent, your body will betray you one day before you notice its change..." Khenpo also encounters extremely sick patients who barely manage to live on and must take all sorts of medicine every day. Death is obviously imminent, yet they have indestructible confidence and behave as if they would live on forever. All of them should take a lesson or two about impermanence.

**When he was among world-protector [gods], as the most honored among world-protectors he protected sentient beings.**

The **world-protector gods** mainly refer to the Four Heavenly Kings of the desire realm. These Four Heavenly Kings all retained immense regard and esteem for the Elder Vimalakirti. In the Tibetan translation, "**he protected sentient beings**" means that Vimalakirti protected and benefited the world-protector gods by ripening their mindstreams with the Dharma. Since their minds are constantly agitated by worldly distractions, Vimalakirti imparted the profound Dharma teachings to them according to their inclinations and guarded their minds from non-virtues.

Buddhist scriptures described how the Four Heavenly Kings have vowed to protect the Buddhadharma. Their representatives are displayed in both Tibetan and Han temples, with a bit of a difference in style. Thangkas and murals of the Four Heavenly King greet visitors at the foyer of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, while in Han region, they stand at the two sides of Maitreya in the front hall.

**The Elder Vimalakirti used immeasurable skillful means such as these to benefit sentient beings.**

Vimalakirti used immeasurable skillful means, such as relating to others by using their own language, to benefit sentient beings. Expedient means are indispensable when it comes to helping others, and the first step, Khenpo says, is trying to integrate oneself into that society. For monastics, this doesn't mean they should disrobe and change into suits and ties or teeter in

high heels as a way of conforming to the world. The gist is to learn the cultures, traditions and languages of different regions and be willing to assimilate; never should we side only with our own faction and distance ourselves from those who disagree with us. If one has traveled to various places in the world, as Khenpo has been doing in recent years during his lecture tours, one will witness the inconceivable ways people vary in their likes and dislikes, as well as their habits and propensities, and come to respect their diversity.

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### **Dharma Protectors and Protector Practices**

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Tales of Dharma Protectors are recorded in Han Buddhist history. Khenpo tells a story about a Zen master during the Tang Dynasty who used to meditate by the edge of a cliff. Becoming drowsy one day, he fell off and thought he was plunging to his death. Instead, he found himself safely caught by a deva, the Bodhisattva Wei Tuo (Skanda). This Bodhisattva had vowed that in this eon with its one thousand prophesied buddhas appearing, he would promote and guard the Buddhadharma and protect devotees from all negative forces. Bodhisattva Wei Tuo is widely revered and supplicated as one of the main Dharma Protectors in Han Buddhism.

Relatively speaking, there is a longer list of Dharma Protectors in Tibetan Buddhism. As far as the Nyingma lineage is concerned, we are closely related to King Gesar, the three main protectors of the Great Perfection—Ekajati, Za Rahula, and Dorje Lekpa, as well as Tsiudmar Dharmapala, each replete with impressive accounts of activities. Khenpo Sodargye shared a personal story that he had personally witnessed the appearance of Tsiudmar Dharmapala. In 1990 he accompanied His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche to visit Bhutan, and on the way to the Gangteng Monastery, Tsiudmar Dharmapala descended into a Bhutanese, who all of sudden could speak fluent Tibetan. According to Tsiudmar's request, His Holiness offered him the initiation of Vajrakilaya and Tendrel Nyesel. Tsiudmar was ultimately pleased and made some future prophesies for His Holiness, saying, "In case of extreme urge, call upon me, for I will assist with all my abilities." So later His Holiness also composed a liturgy of supplicating Tsiudmar Dharmapala.

For serious Vajrayana followers, it is essential to do daily protector practice. In general, protectors play a significant role in guarding the purity and authenticity of the Buddhadharma. Specifically, they make sure that practitioners are free from all kinds of impediments and can persevere until reaching their final goals, no matter that they are engaged in the practice of

compassion, wisdom, or any specific Vajrayana practice. It is not uncommon to hear adherents attesting to their experiences with the Dharma Protectors' mighty power, which is inscrutable for the non-initiated. One key point that Khenpo mentions is that, Dharma protector practice should be kept as a personal and secret practice. Just like many Vajrayana practices, we'd better maintain this practice in an inconspicuous manner, instead of making it noticeable to everyone. Only in this way, can we attain the blessings from Dharma protector to help us dispel obstacles and create favorable conditions in our daily life and spiritual practice.

At Larung Gar, the invocation to Dharma Protectors is performed regularly, and a more intensive group ritual takes place each summer. It is said that more than 100 years ago when Dudjom Lingpa was at Larung Gar, he and a deity of the locality had some disputes that were settled later. Dudjom Lingpa then promised to make offerings to the deity and other Dharma Protectors annually. Thus on the 26<sup>th</sup> day of the 6<sup>th</sup> month of the Tibetan calendar, monastics and laities at Larung Gar all participate in a feast offering to Dharma Protectors and local deities, which is quite special.

In the Han College at Larung Gar, we have the tradition that the sangha together evokes the Dharma protectors as part of prayer chanting every time before Khenpo Sodargye's teaching. Khenpo says that this tradition is kept probably due to his personal habit, since even before he got ordained and came to Larung Gar, being a young student, he understood the importance of praying to Dharma protectors and kept this practice on a regular basis. And thanks to this tradition, although the Han College underwent many unexpected situations in the past few decades, it maintains a stable development.

If Dharma Protectors are properly and constantly evoked, they can actually bestow blessings to practitioners. People worry that the protectors may become "wrathful" should daily offerings to them be interrupted. Khenpo says such a concern is not warranted. There are two kinds of protectors: worldly protector and wisdom protector. The worldly ones have a similar temperament to human beings, and we can relate to them the same way we interact with one another. For instance, if you often keep in touch with your friends or acquaintances and make nice gestures to them, they will be nice to you too. On the other hand, if you ignore them all the time and only look for them when you are in trouble, your chance of getting help from them is slim. Therefore, in order to maintain an ongoing good relationship with worldly protectors, we shall regularly make offerings and prayers to them.

Wisdom Dharma Protectors, on the other hand, are transcendental and will come to your aid no matter what. Nonetheless, as all things are interdependent arising, we need to establish auspicious connections with them through beseeching and making offerings. His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche taught that instead of merely mouthing the protector liturgy, it's better to accompany it by actual material offerings, such as liquor and food. However, Han temples are unfamiliar with the Tibetan way of practice, and the disposal of offering substances may pose a problem for city dwellers. Thus Khenpo advises us to be sensitive to our circumstances, and on some occasions it is fine to symbolically offer some biscuits, candies, and tea, just making sure that within the offerings there are both drinkable and eatable stuff.

This doesn't mean that protectors need our offerings because they are hungry. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Guru Padmasambhava subjugated the twelve tenma goddesses and other spirits hostile to the Dharma, including Yakshas, Raksasas, and non-humans. Guru Padmasambhava bound them under oath to protect the Dharma and accepted their vows of allegiance. He also gave appropriate teachings to them and promised that future practitioners would also appreciate their help by making offerings, praise, and recitations to them. Therefore, when praying to Dharma Protectors, it is necessary to have nice food and wines as an auspicious favorable support to evoke them.

Our guru H.H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche composed an invocation to the twelve tenma goddesses during the bleak upheaval years. Rinpoche pleaded: "Today, Buddhism in the Tibetan area has come to a crossroad facing great obstacles. Protectors, please recall the vows you made previously! Please enact your activities from the basic space of wisdom!" And indeed, the supplication worked in various cases. Thus we can't afford to let slip the practice of Dharma Protectors.

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### Vimalakirti Fell Sick

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**Using skillful means he manifested becoming ill himself. Because he was ill, the king, ministers, elders, retired scholars, brahmins, the princes and the other palace retainers, and innumerable thousands of people all came to inquire about his illness.**

As one of his skillful means, Vimalakirti manifested becoming ill himself. This is how he, as a bodhisattva, exercised skillful means. First, in terms of his body, by appearing to be ill, he

prompted people to come forth inquiring after his health; second, in terms of his speech, he took this opportunity to impart Dharma to his well-wishers. Thus, falling ill may turn out to be a useful situation. In hospitals, we may meet certain individuals with whom we try to make connections and introduce the Dharma to them. Especially when people are sick, it's easier for them to have kindred feelings toward others who also fell prey to illness, and they are open to the words taught by fellow patient masters.

In Khenpo's case, when he was hospitalized not long ago, he met a fellow Tibetan who requested that Khenpo confer blessings. This patient actually had late stage cancer with malignant cells spreading all over his body and, according to the doctor, would die within a month. His family nonetheless kept this news from him. They specifically asked Khenpo not to instruct him phowa but to chant long life prayers; Khenpo then chanted the names of buddhas and the liturgy of Amitayus Buddha. The patient was very happy and said to Khenpo: "My family told me I've recovered completely and I will check out of hospital in a month!"

Because Vilamakirti was ill, innumerable thousands of people including the king, ministers, elders, retired scholars, brahmans, the princes, and others came to inquire about his illness. This list of visitors of high status revealed that Vimalakirti must have been an eminent celebrity himself. Also, he must have visited other patients as well, and now they were reciprocating his favors. Khenpo said that recently two people from his hometown fell ill at the same time. They had similar backgrounds, but one had lots of visitors, whereas the other hardly had any, even his son did not show up. Perhaps his karmic connection with others was to blame. In any case, if Dharma friends fall ill, it is thoughtful for us to call on them.

At the time of the Buddha, a monk was ill and kept on lamenting, "I have no one to protect me, I have no one to rely on!" Buddha came over and comforted him, "Fear not, I'm your very protector!" So the Buddha attended his illness personally and cleaned up his filthy room till it was spotless. If even the Buddha could serve a sick monk this way, what about us?

However, among friends and relatives, not every sick person needs or wants help. To them, Khenpo advises we refrain from visiting, otherwise it may be inconvenient to them. For those who are lonely and need help, we should offer to help with compassion. *The Brahma's Net Sutra* says, "If you see someone who is ill, you should always make offerings to them, no differently than you would for the Buddha. Among the eight fields of merit, that of caring for the ill is foremost." Thus when we come across a sick person, we should take care of them in

a way exactly the same as for the Buddha. Moreover, it is said that the service of looking after a sick person is paramount among the eight fields of merit.

If our resources allow, it would be ideal to establish foundations geared toward patients' welfare. Although health insurance is common these days, some impoverished persons still have no access to medical care, and they need our help financially and physically. In Sichuan Province, there are organizations that aid patients living in remote areas where it is difficult to reach a medical facility, or that help patients communicate better with medical staff members, and so on. It is important to assist underprivileged people on a regular basis.

Another support system is the hospice care that has been established overseas in the United States, Canada, and other countries. Hospice care focuses on the holistic well-being of patients facing terminal illnesses, addressing not only physical conditions but also their emotional and spiritual needs. Patients are not subject to aggressive medical procedures to extend their lives, nor are they hastened to die by assisted suicide. The overall mission of hospice care is to help patients spend the remainder of their lives as fully and comfortably as possible, and to aid their family and friends dealing with the grieving process. Khenpo understands that in Han China, some charity organizations and hospitals are setting up these kinds of facilities to provide humane care for dying patients and their loved ones.

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### **Vimalakirti Expounded the Fragility of Human Body**

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**To those who came, Vimalakirti used the occasion of his illness to make extensive explanations of the Dharma.**

**“Sirs, the body is impermanent, without strength, without power, without solidity. Given the way it rapidly disintegrates, it cannot be trusted.**

**Sirs** means virtuous ones, which is referred to as friends in the Tibetan version, indicating people who called on him were his friends. Khenpo points out that how one addresses others actually reveals one's inner quality and character. It's best to use respectful and polite terms when greeting others and avoid any denigrating and hurtful names. Patrul Rinpoche says in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, “Throughout all my lives, may I never harm so much as a single hair on another being's head, and may I always help each of them.” This passage has

made an indelible mark in Khenpo's mind; we should likewise align our heart and conduct accordingly, and keep this aspiration as our motto for life.

Using the occasion of his illness, Vimalakirti gave the extensive Dharma teachings to his visitors. The teachings below are very crucial, because it reveals the Buddhist way of analyzing the human body: First, the body is impermanence; second, it is full of suffering; next, it is emptiness; forth, it is devoid of an inherent existence of self; and finally, it is impure.

**Impermanent** speaks generally of the body's transient nature. **Without strength** means when the body ages, it loses its strength and becomes fragile and feeble. **Without power** indicates the body is not durable, which is not obvious when healthy, but becomes evident the moment sickness strikes, just like Patrul Rinpoche's metaphor of a sparrow being hit by a stone, unable to move or eat at all. **Without solidity** means this body is insubstantial. Our body is believed to be stable and solid, but it's not. For example, at the charnel ground when the body is chopped up and devoured by vultures, instantly it becomes nothing. Indeed, it was having witnessed the sights of old age, sickness, and death that Prince Siddhatha, the future Buddha, was propelled to embark on the path of seeking truth.

So our human body is unreliable; it will betray us when we are sick, aging, or dying, and quickly rot away. As said in the *Sutra of the Sublime Dharma of Clear Recollection*,

*The lives of all sentient beings,  
Like lightning, like the wheel of fire,  
Like a city of gandharvas,  
Elapse quickly without suspending.*

Likewise, a verse quoted in *Lamrim Chenmo* and *Finding Comfort and Ease in the Nature of Mind* echoes:

*The three worlds are impermanent like an autumn cloud.  
The birth and death of beings is like watching a dance.*

Crucially, regardless who you are, let this view sink in your heart, even if you consider yourself quite strong and healthy for now. In one hundred years at most, not to mention a time much sooner, we definitely will lose this body. If we have understood the above teachings, we can face illness or death in ways unattainable by those who are otherwise unprepared. When the

final moment comes, we embrace it courageously and confidently, in stark contrast to others gripped by agony, desperation, and fear, even if they have been world-renowned scientists or celebrities.

**Alternately suffering and vexatious, it accumulates a host of illnesses. Sirs, the wise do not rely on such a body.**

The body is also full of suffering. Sentient beings are afflicted with a host of illnesses. In fact, the body is the location, the source, and the working basis of our suffering and defilements, upon which illnesses accumulate. It is said in the scriptures that physical diseases caused by the disorder of each of the four elements, i.e., earth, water, fire, and wind, amount to one hundred and one, thus totaling to four hundred and four bodily maladies. Additionally, the *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* lists three humors of wind, bile, and phlegm as the vital substances of the body, and an imbalance of one or more of the humors results in disease. In other versions, **it accumulates a host of illnesses** is followed by **it possesses the nature of decaying**, meaning our body naturally declines.

Therefore, the wise do not rely on such a body. No person of wisdom would depend or cling onto a thing like this body. Why? Because no matter how tenaciously one tries to hold onto the body, it will slip away in the end. The sages deem that having a body is what makes them liable to great calamity, whereas the foolish never tire of becoming infatuated with their own body, imagining it as most handsome and everlasting.

*The Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* states:

*Although the body is seen like a foe,  
Nevertheless it should be protected.*

As we depend on having a body to perform virtuous deeds, we have to care and maintain our body; but in fact it is like an enemy unworthy of our clinging. Today many people get very disheartened when becoming sick or seeing wrinkles on their faces. Indeed, if one lacks a thorough understanding of the above teaching, suffering from the attachment to the body is unavoidable.

**This body is like a bit of foam that cannot be grasped. This body is like bubbles that do not last very long. This body is like a mirage, generated from thirst. This body is like a**



**banana tree, with nothing solid within. This body is like a phantasm arising from confused [views]. This body is like a dream, an illusory view. This body is like a shadow, manifested through karmic conditions.**

This body is like a bit of foam that will not stay when being touched, tapped, kneaded, or handled. Glittering foam is beautiful, but it will burst on contact with another object. Our physical body is just as fragile. No amount of maintenance including taking the most exalted dietary supplements can prevent its eventual demise to nothingness. Be sure to understand this essential instruction!

This body is like bubbles that cannot last very long. Water bubbles or soap bubbles last only a few seconds, similarly we're not immortal. People reach their prime during youth, and then everything goes downhill from there; in the twinkling of an eye, wrinkles will take over one's face.

This body is like a mirage, born from the thirst of love. When people are lost in the desert and run out of water, they may see a shimmering puddle of water on the horizon and feel elated. However, it's not a pool of water but a mirage, an optical illusion caused by atmospheric conditions that has fooled many thirsty explorers and animals. Likewise, due to desire we have this temporary body that is a mere gathering of five aggregates. It is an illusion not worth clinging to.

This body is like a banana tree which has many layers. When one layer after the other is peeled off, nothing solid within can be found. The hollowness of banana tree has been used as a metaphor in both *The Root Stanzas on the Middle Way* and *The Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*, to illustrate the insubstantial nature of the body. Additionally, the Tibetan version points out that the body, like a machine, is a nexus of flesh, blood, tendons, bones, and so forth. These parts make up the totality of what we regard as a "body", but there is not a singular entity that is the body itself. The solidity of the body cannot be found when investigated by empirical methods.

The body that we normally regard as truly existing is actually like a phantasm, arising from confused views. The characters in a movie seem to possess real bodies, but they are devoid of true existence. Similarly, this illusory conjunction of five aggregates, the body, is believed as true and real, yet it has no inherent existence.

This body is like a dream, being formed by false and illusory views. When we are dreaming, everything in it appears to be real; only upon waking up will we realize what happens in the dream is false and illusory. The body we have now is actually a body in a bigger dream, an illusion compounded by false visions.

This body is like a shadow and is caused by karmic conditions. Shadows reflect the shapes of things; similarly, our body that comes in all sizes and shapes reflects our former actions. Our present body, whether it is beautiful, ugly, slim, fat, satisfactory to us or not, is not determined by our parents, who serve merely as facilitators. The real creator of our body is our karma of previous lifetimes. Do bear this in mind! Some people are not happy about their looks and blame it on their parents. Actually, our parents are quite innocent in this. Should parents have the choice to decide, would they not make the cutest baby, the perfect offspring? But they simply don't have the option. By the same token, our future bodies will be formed depending on virtuous or non-virtuous actions we commit in this life. Take this advice as "golden counsel"!

## Lecture 13

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### A Few Words Before the Teaching

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Before the teaching, Khenpo thanked all the volunteers who dedicate themselves to providing all the necessary resources and conveniences to support the live teaching. Without their efforts, many people won't be able to have such a good opportunity to receive the teaching. So Khenpo conveys his sincere gratitude to all the volunteers, and asked the sangha to bless them and to dedicate the merit to them when chanting *The King of Aspiration Prayers* after the teaching.

Khenpo emphasized once again that, everyone must take the Dharma teachings seriously. Through reflecting on the rarity of human existence, the impermanence of life, and the difficulty to encounter the Dharma, one should not simply regard the Dharma as something casual and just listen to the teaching out of sheer curiosity. All great masters throughout history had strict requirements on the motivation and the discipline of receiving the teaching, and we should follow such requirements.

Thanks to the modern technology, nowadays most people receive the profound Mahayana teachings through live streaming, but sometimes the online audience doesn't behave as properly as the onsite students at Larung Gar. People online may be too casual toward the teaching of the Dharma, as they are often late and tend to be less focused and attentive during the teaching. Hereby, Khenpo requested that the audience adopts a proper manner towards the Dharma teaching.

Since life is short and time is very precious, if one has made the decision to receive the teaching, then he or she needs to earnestly and diligently follow the teaching. Every time before the teaching, it is better to have all the chores done before hand. If one is busy with other things and suddenly recall, "Oh, I have a class today!", it only indicates that this person does not care much about the Dharma. As a Buddhist, one should be ashamed to have such an attitude.

Currently we are talking about the Buddhist view on the human body. Khenpo wishes that through these teachings everyone can correct their wrong views concerning the body, and gain a better and thorough understanding of it. Everyone cares about and attaches great importance to their physical body, having no idea that the body is constrained by the bondage of various causes and conditions. As mentioned, the body is like a shadow, manifested through karmic

conditions. So we are the maker of our body, not our parents. To be fair, nobody should complain that their parents made them ugly. If their parents have such abilities, why haven't these people made their own babies the most beautiful in the first place? Apparently, they don't have such choice.

Some scientists and medical experts attribute the gene mutation to a person's look, reckoning that under special conditions beautiful parents' genes have been mutated and thus their children become ugly. This statement is not necessarily true. Indeed, it takes more than genetics to illuminate the law of cause and effect. The karmic law pervasively governs everything, including our own body. Therefore, we should reflect like this, "Whether I am beautiful or ugly, healthy or ill, strong or weak, it is only due to my own karma accumulated in the past lifetimes. If I want to complain, I can only complain about my karma. For example, if my body tends to easily fall sick, I might have created too much bad karma in the past." In fact, many incurable health problems are the continuation of the karmic effect of our previous lives.

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### Vimalakirti Expounded the Fragility of Human Body

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**This body is like an echo, dependent on causes and conditions.**

Like an echo in the valley, the body is a product of various causes and conditions, including one's ignorance, good and bad karma, as well as father's sperm and mother's ovum, the four primary elements, etc. It is produced by the combination of all the above, not a single one. Not only our body, but also our feelings, our life experiences and so on all dependently arise from certain causes and conditions. This principle of dependent arising is very profound and incredible, and has been taught in many sutras and shastras, such as Lama Tsongkhapa's *In Praise of Dependent Origination*. As Buddha Shakyamuni said,

*All things arise from causes,*

*Those causes have been taught by the Tathagata.*

*And those things cease because of causes,*

*This, too, has the Great Shramana explained.*

It is the truth revealed by the Buddha who later used a great deal of skillful means to expound it to different living beings. Upon hearing this profound truth, we should have a better understanding of our own conditions, including health issues and mental problems, etc. Some

illnesses are probably caused by short term disorders, such as flu, whereas long-term disorders may be triggered by causes that can be traced further back to the previous lives from even tens of thousands of year ago, and cannot be healed immediately by medical treatment, chanting prayers or practicing virtues. If we truly understand this principle, we will be open-minded about many things happening in our life. For example, some people could feel very sad about their dissatisfactory looks, fragile health or destitution, but once they understand that they themselves are the creator of their own lives, they will stop grumbling.

**This body is like a cloud, which changes and disappears in an instant.**

Clouds may seem changeless on first glance, but under a close observation, they are actually changing moment to moment. For example, the white clouds turn into dark ones; the heavy cloud clusters change into slender strips; the cloudless morning sky becomes clouded over the afternoon. So clouds are constantly changing into different shapes, which are determined by different conditions. Similarly, the physical body is impermanent and changes constantly. Someone may wonder, “How can it change constantly? My body seldom changes.” This is just one’s own delusion. As a matter of fact, some used to be slim but become fat and need to take diet pills; some were pretty at a young age then gradually turn ugly when getting old.

Looking at one’s own photos in different ages, some may feel disappointed, be puzzled by the big difference between the young face and the old one. When and how did this change happen? Or take a look at those great persons of history, one can never predict their future from how they appeared in their youth. It is difficult to see the changes of our body within a day or two, but after a period of time, we will notice its dramatic change. Like clouds in the sky, the nature of our bodies is impermanence and we should accept this fact.

Also, some people track their weight every day and their mood swings with the increase and decrease of the weight. However, it is not necessary to feel happy or sad about the weight because it is certainly impermanent, like the forming and disappearing of the clouds.

**This body is like lightening, unstable from one moment to another.**

The physical body is like lightening which appears and disappears in an instant. Death can take our body away in the snap of a finger. In *The Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, it goes as follows, “This body is not eternal, and does not stay stable even for a second. It is like lightning, madding

water, and a mirage.” These metaphors all demonstrate the instability of our body that changes from one moment to another. Some may feel it is hard to believe, but this is the reality.

As early as in 1978, the term Karōshi, means overwork death, was invented in Japan to refer to an increasing number of people suffering from fatal strokes and heart attacks attributed to overwork. But there are more reasons that can cause sudden death. Many people are safe and sound before going to sleep, but are found dead the next morning. According to an official report, every year there are over 1.8 million people who die of sudden death in China, amongst whom 1,400 people die of heart attack every day. Therefore, life is fleeting. Even though illness has spared us today, traffic accident could take our life tomorrow. Then two or three days later, the body would be either buried under ground, cremated or exposed to the sky burial. A life once so alive and vital is quickly gone, leaving no ashes on the earth.

Hence, the human body is not strong nor stable. If we often listen to and contemplate the Buddha’s teachings on impermanence, we will cultivate a firm belief in this truth. Then we can accept the death and misfortunes in our lives more peacefully instead of wailing and complaining about the injustice of fate, or being caught in desperation. Take terminal cancer as an example. Those who have little religious education and poor mental endurance are likely to suffer a nervous breakdown; while those who have been educated in this regard, on the other hand, are more likely to be prepared for the dramatic change of body, and be fine with whatever time that is left for life.

### **The body is without master, like the earth.**

The earth has no fixed master, as Kumarajiva said in his commentary, “It belongs to the powerful one.” For instance, a country was ruled by different monarchs during different historical periods, and its master kept changing. So does our body, which is like the earth, without a constant master. When we are sick, the body belongs to Mara of Illness; when we are aging and dying, the body belongs to Mara of Death; when other incidents happen, the masters of the body will change accordingly.

Some may think that they can become the owner of a land after purchasing it, but it will not belong to them forever, and after death, it will be kept by someone else. So does our body. Once consciousness leaves the body, the body can be owned by vultures as a big meal. One day, a group of non-Buddhists went to see the sky burial at the charnel ground. When they were back, Khenpo asked them, “How do you feel about the sky burial?” They answered, “Oh,

it left us a deep impression! The body we nurture and adorn tirelessly everyday will end up with nothing.” Actually, this is the exact reason why Shantideva and Chandrakirti emphasized the importance for Dharma practitioners to visit the charnel ground.

We always consider ourselves as the master of our body, but it is not the true reality. Khenpo suggests that we reflect on this teaching again and again, and ask ourselves, “Isn’t my body like fire, lightening or cloud?” In fact, such kinds of observation and contemplation is exactly the Dharma practice.

### **The body is without self, like fire;**

When proper conditions gather together, the fire can be started; when these conditions disappear, the fire will go out. Likewise, the body does not have a so-called independent self (or “life” in the Tibetan version), and it only exists when causes and conditions are sufficient. When any of those causes and conditions are lacking, the body will disappear. For example, it will become a corpse after death, or it does not exist before birth.

### **The body is without lifespan, like the wind;**

The body has no real lifespan, as random as the wild wind. We don’t have a fixed lifespan, and nobody can guarantee that we will live 80, 100 or 120 years, which rarely happens. As the old saying goes, “On the road to death, there are both the young and the old; moreover, those lonely tombs mostly belong to the young.” Although there have been numerous people who died at a young age, we still take it for granted that we won’t die as we’re still young. Indeed, just like the changes in weather in that a gale can suddenly blow across the bright sky, one may go to bed peacefully at night and never wake up the next morning.

Nagarjuna says in his *Letter to a Friend*,

*With all its many risks, this life endures  
No more than windblown bubbles in a stream.  
How marvelous to breathe in and out again,  
To fall asleep and then awake refreshed.*

This verse means that our life is as fragile as the bubbles, which will burst as soon as the wind blows. It is common to breathe one’s last while sleeping or awake and then die. Death may occur to anyone so suddenly and easily. In the old days, the Kadampa practitioners who

constantly meditated on impermanence would put their bowls upside down before going to sleep, because they did not believe that they would wake up the next morning. Tibetans usually preserve fire in ashes before sleep so that they can restart the fire the next morning. But those practitioners wouldn't do this either, as they would not believe that they would be alive the next day.

We should adopt such a practice accordingly. Some may think, "This attitude is too pessimistic. It's not necessary to think so!" In fact, if one meditates well on impermanence, he or she will lead a happier life. As Bhutanese have a common saying, "Take this very moment as the end of your life, and contemplate it five times a day, you will be a happy person."

**This body is without person, like water.**

There are two ways to explain this sentence. One is that body is like the reflection on the water which is unobtainable. The so-called person cannot be found in the body. The leg is not me, the foot is not me, and the heart is not me, etc. When observing closely and analyzing part by part like this, the person can never be found, just like making vain efforts to grab a hold of the moon in the water.

The other explanation is that body is like the flowing river. Under close observation, we will find that it is our conception to call the flowing water a river. The river is devoid of intrinsic existence. Once Khenpo met an old lady during his trip in Thailand, who said to him, "The Mekong River has been here since I was a young girl, and it is still here." At that time, Khenpo thought to himself, "This is even not the same river in this morning, not to mention the one when you were young." The same goes to our body. Although it looks the same yesterday and today, it is changing all the time and empty in nature.

Above are the metaphors of the four primary elements (earth, water, fire and wind). In the Tibetan version and Xuangzang's version, it is followed by the metaphor of space, saying that the body is like the space, which lacks intrinsic existence.

**This body is insubstantial, being housed in the four elements.**

All in all, the body is insubstantial, as it is constituted by the four primary elements of earth, water, fire and wind. We call this combination "body" or "self", which is actually an imputed identity. In Chandrakirti's commentary on *Introduction to the Middle Way* a verse says,



*When different parts of a vehicle are gathered properly,  
It is named by people as “vehicle”,  
So too does the accumulation of the five aggregates,  
It is designated as “sentient being” on the conventional level.*

This metaphor is excellent. We call it “vehicle” only because there are wheels, steering wheel and many other different parts that are being put together. By the same token, we designate the combination of the four primary elements or five aggregates as “sentient being” on the conventional level. On the ultimate level, the “body” or “self” does not exist at all.

**This body is empty, transcending self and the qualities of self.**

Here **empty** doesn't mean empty space. It means that the body is devoid of intrinsic existence, no matter from which aspect it is observed. For this reason, self-clinging can be eliminated, without which the clinging to personal possession will not arise either.

**This body is ignorant, like plants and rocks.**

Other than Buddhism, modern science also points out that our body is made up of protein, carbohydrates and water, etc. It is said that 60~70% of human body is water, and the percentage varies according to the gender. So the body is the same as plants and rocks that are formed by elements such as earth, water, fire and wind, etc. The body itself is senseless, the cognition and feeling simply arise from the involvement of five sense consciousnesses, mental consciousness and alaya consciousness.

**This body is inactive, being turned by the power of the wind.**

The body is inactive, and cannot move by itself, like a corpse. But why can we wave our hands? It is because that the body is replete with wind. When Anuyoga talks about the channels, winds-energies and essences, it is stated that there are five root winds in human body, namely upward-moving wind, downward-clearing wind, all-pervading wind, fire accompanying wind, and life-supporting wind. With the movement of these winds, our body can move and our conceptual thoughts can change. Without such conditions, our body will be motionless, like a windmill without wind.

In some commentaries on *Vimalakirti Sutra*, it is said that like a puppet which cannot function if the cords are broken, our body will be motionless without the movement of winds. So the

movement of body is supported by various causes and conditions, without which the body will be unconscious or unmovable, just like those patients in vegetative state or with hemiplegia. Thus, we should understand that the body itself is inactive.

**This body is impure, replete with defilement.**

The origin of the body is the impure seeds of parents, the place it comes from is the impure womb, and it is composed of 36 impure elements, therefore, the body is impure. Some people may argue, “It is not true. My body is really clean, pretty and smells very good.” If you wear perfume, your body will smell good, but as stated in *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, the fragrance is from the perfume, not your body. *The Introduction to the Middle Way* says, if your body is pure and really smells good, then how come after the clean and delicious food going through the body system, the impure excrement comes out and pollutes the earth in the end? Aryadeva’s *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* also says that,

*Clean things are looked upon  
As the most worthless of all.  
What intelligent person  
Would say that it is clean?*

After the food is eaten and digested by our body, it becomes impure. So a wise person won’t think the body is pure. To console people we might say it is pure, but honestly speaking, the body is impure and even terrible.

Milarepa said that the so-called body is very horrifying and it is no different to the corpse. When we see a corpse, we will say, “Oh, that’s disgusting. How dirty and smelly it is!” At Larung Gar, there is an area for placing dead bodies temporarily, where monastics would chant prayers for those dead. When some people pass by that area, they will cover their noses with some part of their clothes and still feel that it really stinks. Actually, the only difference between us and corpses is that we haven’t fallen down yet, so everyone is like a walking corpse.

**This body is untrustworthy, since even though one washes, clothes, and feeds it, it will necessarily disintegrate.**

Through careful observation, no one can disprove that the body is an aggregation. No matter how well we take care of this body by washing, clothing and feeding, and no matter what

nutritious and healthy food we take, the body will disintegrate sooner or later, and there is nothing we can do about this nature of impermanence.

Many people nowadays are willing to try different ways to look younger, and that's why yoga courses and gym membership fees become more and more expensive. Those "little fresh meat" (young boys) want to develop 8-pack abs, and young ladies want to keep fit and get V-line abs. It is said that recently many rich people in China go to Ukraine to receive stem cell injection, which may cost 600,000 RMB. By doing so, they believe that they can become as young as 30 years old. On one hand, it is good to maintain a good body shape and good health; on the other hand, we must accept the fact that the physical body follows the natural law of aging and no one can escape from it.

Now is an age when being young has many advantages, and society values the young generation the most. Although they are just a small proportion of the population, most commercials focus on them, and many TV programs are tailor-made for them. Many people think that once they get old, they will be useless and abandoned by the society. This kind of attitude is taken advantage of by many advertisers who induce people to become younger in order to squeeze money out of them.

When looking at this phenomena, we should ponder why the value system of the modern society is changing like this, and who will care and carry forward the most meaningful and valuable cultures? Haven't people around us or even we ourselves already turned our eyes to the rejuvenation of the body, and is it reasonable? Rationally speaking, a person should not only be judged by their appearance. The young appearance only lasts 10 or 20 years at most, and nobody can stay young forever. In Tibetan traditional culture, seniors are admired for their deep wisdom and rich life experiences, and no one discriminates the old and praises the young. But now there could be some changes. So for us modern people, probably it is more essential to understand the fact that the physical body is untrustworthy because it will disintegrate sooner or later.

**This body is a disaster, vexed by a hundred and one illnesses.**

The body is a burden and a disaster which is disturbed by 101 illnesses caused by each of the four great elements, so the physical body is the cause of all suffering. In a Buddhist text, it says that having a physical body is more suffering than anything else in this world, and Laozi also

has the similar statement. It is this body that causes diseases today and tomorrow and makes one feel uncomfortable.

**This body is like a well on a hill, pressed by age.**

A **well on a hill** is a literal translation from Chinese, which actually means an old well that has almost dried up. Without water source, a well is drying out day by day. Similarly, the physical body is threatened by aging. People may be not clearly aware until the aging process becomes obvious. Some would say it starts at 30 years old, while others say it starts at 40s or 50s. In fact, ever since we were born, we have been growing old and heading for death day by day.

With the passing of time, those “little fresh meat” will become “dried meat”. When Khenpo meets some Tibetan folks, sometimes he thinks to himself, “They must have been handsome when they were young, but after going through so many joys and sorrows of life, they become what they look now.” Everybody will be like this, becoming more and more like a dried well.

**This body is unreliable, dying in spite of being needed.**

In *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, it says that there will definitely be one day that death will approach and the body will be gone. This is something one should have no doubt. Nobody can avoid meeting his or her demise. In *Sutra of Dispelling Uneasiness*, it also says,

*Either on the earth or in the heaven,  
Among beings in these three worlds,  
And born in any of the four modes of birth,  
No one can escape from impermanence.*

There is no one in this world who could escape from impermanence and live forever. Emperor Qin Shi Huang also tried to seek Taoist methods and other special powers to be immortal, but of course, that kind of live-forever power was not obtained then, neither is it now. At the time of death, even if the Medicine Buddha or the best doctor in the world comes to you, there is no way to escape death. Impermanence cannot be avoided by anyone, and death is the destination of all sentient beings.

**This body is like a poisonous snake, a vengeful bandit, an empty aggregation. It is the composite of the skandhas, sensory realms, and sensory capacities.**

The body is controlled by the five skandhas, or the five aggregates, just like someone being controlled by vengeful bandits. The body is restrained by eighteen dhatus, or the eighteen sensory realms, just like a prey being captured and entangled to death by a poisonous snake. And the body is locked by the twelve ayatanas, or the twelve bases of cognition, like an empty aggregation, i.e., an empty village which used to be full of residents but is deserted now.

Kumarajiva told a story in his commentary. Once, there was a man who was to be secretly killed by the King. The King asked him to carry on the back a basket in which there was four poisonous snakes. The plan was to have five bandits attack him as he carried the basket. Before the attack took place, a spiritual teacher came and urged him to escape, otherwise he would be killed. So this man fled to some place and saw an empty village where he planned to take up residence. However, the spiritual teacher told him to leave again as there were many bandits living in this abandoned village. Thus, he left and later met a river on the way. He made a raft himself to cross the river and eventually gained freedom after reaching the other side of the river.

The implied meaning of this story is: The King represents mara; the four snakes represent the four primary elements; the five bandits are the five skandhas; the empty village with many bandits in it is the twelve ayatanas. When he was threatened by all these, the spiritual teacher guided him out of there. In the end, with the raft of the noble eightfold path, he cut through the samsara and reached the other shore of nirvana. By using these metaphors, we can learn that the body is full of faults.

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### **The Body of the Buddha**

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**“Sirs, this [body] being so calamitous and repugnant, you should wish for the body of the Buddha. Why?”**

**“The body of the Buddha is the body of the Dharma. It is generated through immeasurable wisdom and merit. It is generated through morality, meditation, wisdom, emancipation, and the knowledge and vision of emancipation.”**

According to some commentaries, the teaching above analyzes the human body in terms of its impermanence, suffering, emptiness, selflessness and impurity. Through these analyses we should understand that the body has infinite faults, and therefore, we should detest this physical

body and aspire for the body of the Buddha. Fundamentally speaking, the body of the Buddha comprises three kayas, namely the nirmanakaya, sambhogakaya and dharmakaya, among which the most ultimate, adamant and indestructible body is the dharmakaya.

The dharmakaya of the Buddha derives from the countless and boundless collections of merit, quality and wisdom. It is generated through morality, meditation, wisdom, emancipation, and the knowledge and vision of emancipation. **Emancipation** is the stage of nirvana, and **the knowledge and vision of emancipation** is the wisdom of emancipation, which refers to the wisdom that knows the nature of all phenomena and the wisdom that knows the multiplicity of phenomena of the Buddha.

**It is generated through sympathy, compassion, joy, and equanimity. It is generated through the perfections of charity, morality, forbearance and adaptability, energetic exertion, meditation, emancipation, samadhi, and learned wisdom.**

The dharmakaya is generated from the four immeasurables of love, compassion, joy and equanimity. It is also generated from the six paramitas. Here, **forbearance and adaptability** correspond to the paramita of patience. **Meditation, emancipation, samadhi** are the paramita of concentration, and **learned wisdom** belongs to the paramita of wisdom.

There are corresponding trainings in discipline, meditation and wisdom in the causal stage, which is well explained in Mipham Rinpoche's *Gateway to Knowledge*. The qualities of the Buddha are taught in many shastras such as *The Ornament of Clear Realization*, *Uttaratantra Shastra* and *The Ornament of the Mahayana Sutras*. But such a state of realization is out of our current reach. Many of us may feel quite clear when we talk about the faults of the physical body, whereas we may not have a good grasp on the enlightenment state of buddhas and bodhisattvas, therefore Khenpo just goes through this part quickly.

**It is generated from skillful means; it has been generated from the six penetrations; it is generated from the three illuminations; it is generated from the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment; it has been generated from concentration and contemplation; it is generated from the ten powers, the four fearlessnesses, and the eighteen exclusive attributes; it is generated from the eradication of all the dharmas that are not good and accumulation of all the good dharmas. It is generated from the truth; it is generated from the absence of negligence.**

The **three illuminations** refer to the supercognition of one's own and others' past lives, the supercognition of the divine eye and the supercognition of the exhaustion of the defilements. **The truth** refers to the correct view, and **the absence of negligence** addresses the actual practice. One needs to cultivate the right view and to engage in the actual practice of bodhisattva from life to life.

The qualities of the Buddha are not cultivated in a day or two. Some people take it for granted that they would attain enlightenment quickly once they engage in the Dharma practices. In fact, it is not that easy at all, as buddhahood can only be achieved through immeasurable efforts to accumulate merits and to purify obscuration.

**“The Tathagata's body is generated from immeasurable pure dharmas such as these.**

The immeasurable pure dharmas can only be accumulated day by day, life by life, not overnight. One's mind has to be tamed gradually through accumulating merits and eliminating mental afflictions in numerous lifetimes. In *Bodhisambharaka*, it is taught,

*With but a lesser accumulation of merit*

*One remains unable to realize bodhi.*

*Merit the measure of a hundred Mount Sumerus*

*Only an accumulation exceeding that would enable one's enlightenment.*

So it is impossible to achieve buddhahood with a little merit. The dharmakaya can only be achieved through accumulating merits exceeding the measure of a hundred Mount Sumerus through countless lifetimes.

Nowadays, some people usually lack patience in accumulating merits and cultivating virtues, and they would expect to make great progress after a short period of practice. Indeed, all those great masters had been diligently practicing virtues in countless lifetimes. Without patience, even the worldly achievement will be out of reach, not to mention the achievement in spiritual practice. Therefore, we should firmly and stably cultivate the right views, carefully discipline our behaviors, and remain cautious and mindful all the time, so that we can accumulate immeasurable pure dharmas from life to life.

**Sirs, if you wish to attain the body of the Buddha and eradicate all the illnesses of sentient beings, you should generate the intention to achieve anuttara samyaksambodhi!”**

We should not only aspire to attain the body of the Buddha for ourselves and eradicate our own illnesses, but we should also aspire to eradicate the illnesses of all sentient beings. Many people have a fear of being sick. Especially those people who seldom fall sick worry all day long about their illness and are scared of death. Actually, it is not so bad to be sick sometimes. There are two things to ponder when we are sick. One is that given the nature of impermanence of the body, it is a great opportunity to practice the exchange of self and others at that time. The other is that we should take this opportunity to introduce more people to the Buddha path of liberation, such as the doctors, nurses and other patients nearby. In this way, our illness would be valuable.

In the past, when His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was hospitalized, many people went to see him. Later on, these people as well as some doctors and nurses around him all became faithful Buddhists. Khenpo wishes that if we have to go to hospital, we should happily take this opportunity to benefit all people around us, just like Vimalakirti.

**Thus did the Elder Vimalakirti explain the Dharma for those who inquired about his illness, causing innumerable thousands of people to all generate the intention to achieve anuttara samyaksambodhi.**

The Elder Vimalakirti explained the nature of the body for those who came to visit him. It was very suitable to teach the Dharma on that occasion, because it is easier for them to accept such teachings related to their own body. Vimalakirti's teachings made innumerable thousands of people generate the intention to achieve anuttara samyaksambodhi. Khenpo also encourages us followers to benefit sentient beings through various means. In the audience some are doctors, and Khenpo hopes that they fulfill their duties and be more responsible and do their best to treat the patients. This is a good opportunity for them to accumulate merits. The patients should learn from Vimalakirti, too. Our body is the source of suffering and everyone will inevitably get sick. Everybody should understand this true reality and transform sickness into favorable conditions for spiritual practice.