

The Lecture Notes of Chapter Three of the Vimalakirti Sutra

by Khenpo Sodargye's translation team

Lecture 14	- 2 -
Khenpo's Bidding Before Class.....	- 2 -
Pay a Visit to the Patient Vimalakirti	- 3 -
Shariputra's dialogue with Vimalakirti.....	- 4 -
Mahamaudgalyayana's dialogue with Vimalakirti	- 10 -
Lecture 15	- 20 -
Delve into the Dharma Study Deeply.....	- 20 -
Who is Mahakashyapa?	- 21 -
Mahakashyapa's dialogue with Vimalakirti	- 22 -
Lecture 16	- 34 -
Subhuti's dialogue with Vimalakirti	- 35 -
Lecture 17	- 52 -
A Few More Words about Subhuti's Story	- 52 -
Purna's dialogue with Vimalakirti	- 57 -
Lecture 18	- 68 -
A Few Words Before the Teaching	- 68 -
Who is Katyayana?.....	- 71 -
Katyayana's dialogue with Vimalakirti.....	- 73 -
Aniruddha's dialogue with Vimalakirti.....	- 78 -
Lecture 19	- 84 -
Upali's dialogue with Vimalakirti	- 85 -
Lecture 20	- 99 -
The Happiness of Studying the Vimalakirti Sutra	- 99 -
The Buddha's Son Venerable Rahula	- 100 -
Rahula's dialogue with Vimalakirti	- 102 -
Lecture 21	- 115 -
Who is Ananda?	- 116 -
Ananda's Dialogue with Vimalakirti.....	- 118 -

Lecture 14

Khenpo's Bidding Before Class

The first two chapters that we've learned convey crucial messages. The first chapter, "Buddha Land", expounds that as the mind is pure, the buddha land is pure. The view that every phenomenon is fundamentally pure is also ascertained in the teaching of the Great Perfection. The second chapter, "Skillful Means", describes Vimalakirti's inconceivable expedient activities of benefiting sentient beings, as well as his teaching on the fragility of the human body.

All these teachings deserve our deep and vigorous reflection, thus we can develop an irreversible faith in the profound Buddhist philosophy deep in our heart. The process of studying the Dharma is unlike that of studying mundane knowledge. Through contemplation and meditation on the Dharma, one will experience a shift in one's perspective of life and value system. Such change is far from becoming dispirited or passive, as worldly people may presume. In fact, genuine Mahayana practitioners are becoming happier, more resilient, and more ready to serve others with loving-kindness. It's impossible for a Mahayanist to become selfish and vile. Thus, to doubt and worry about following the Buddhist path, as some worldly people do, is unnecessary and unfounded.

The important thing is that we must study the Dharma unflinchingly. Regardless of one's status, education, and age, study is essential. Even if death comes tomorrow, make time to study today. Some people may consider themselves highly knowledgeable, yet they still have more to learn, especially with regard to following authentic spiritual teachers. In *Treasury of Precious Qualities* Vidyadhara Jigme Lingpa says: "When a log of ordinary wood lies in the forests of Malaya, it will be impregnated with the moisture dripping from the leaves of the sandalwood trees and will gradually imbibe the sweet sandalwood perfume. In just the same way, if you are able to frequent a spiritual master, you will quickly acquire the latter's qualities." When an ordinary tree falls in a sandalwood forest filled with fragrance, after some years it will come to smell as sweet as the sandalwood trees around it. Similarly, you will come to resemble that person whom you live and study with. Therefore, as ordinary people, it is important to choose your friends, whether you're in the monastics order or not. If your friend tends to be judgmental

or perverted, you'll become sullied as well; if your friend is full of devotion, wisdom, and compassion, your mind will be influenced subtly to acquire the same qualities.

Through studying the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, we can clearly see that to some extent, many tantric doctrines do exist in sutra scriptures and that enlightenment does not depend on ordination. Usually people tend to think that the monastics are superior to lay people in terms of their views and practices. Vimalakirti exemplifies that the spiritual attainment of lay Buddhists indeed can surpass that of the monastics. Particularly in this chapter, he debates a host of disciples and bodhisattvas, demonstrating his deep enlightenment that intimidates even the most prominent disciples of the Buddha. Some people have difficulty to fully accept certain views and behaviors in Tibetan Buddhism, and this sutra actually provides good evidence for them to validate the necessity of those practices. Therefore as Mahayana Buddhists, we should not confine and solidify our view to a limited space, in that case we only end up with a short-sighted vision and our wisdom will not be fully developed.

Pay a Visit to the Patient Vimalakirti

At that time the Elder Vimalakirti thought to himself, “I am lying sick in bed. How can the World-Honored One, He of Great Sympathy, not take pity on me?”

Knowing what [Vimalakirti] was thinking, the Buddha immediately told Shariputra, “Go visit Vimalakirti and inquire about his illness.”

As mentioned in the previous chapter, since Vimalakirti had been sick, thousands of people including the king, ministers, brahmins came to visit him, and through listening to his teaching, these visitors all generated bodhicitta in their minds. At that time Vimalakirti thought to himself, “Now I'm sick and bed-bound. Why did not the great compassionate Buddha take pity on me?” The Tibetan version says why the Buddha sent no one to inquire after his illness. According to some commentaries, since the Buddha at this moment was transmitting Dharma to the five hundred elders' sons and many others in Vaishali city, while Vimalakirti was too sick to attend the teaching, he became upset and thought of the Buddha anxiously. Then the Buddha, knowing what Vimalakirti was thinking, said to Shariputra, one of the Buddha's closest apprentices and foremost in wisdom among all the disciples of the Buddha, “Go visit Vimalakirti and inquire about his illness on my behalf.”

Here it illustrates the Buddhist attitude toward patients. When people become ill, we should show genuine concern for them that is not distorted by differences in position or status. We see that even the Buddha, the lord of perfect enlightenment, still displayed great loving care for his disciples. *The Sutra of Buddha's Saying in Every Aspect* states: "There are four acts equivalent to making an offering to the Buddha himself, which are: offering food and water to helpless animals, offering comfort and help to the sick neglected by others, offering materials and support to the poor, and offering sustenance to solitary practitioners in need." This theme is echoed in *Essential Collection of Many Sutras*: "The Buddha said, for anyone willing to make an offering to me, you should make an offering to the patients first."

We should keep the Buddha's words in mind and put them in action. Birth, aging, sickness, and death are challenging passages in life. At these difficult junctures, people are confused, in pain, and most vulnerable. Even someone as advanced spiritually as Vimalakirti, when bedridden, still secretly yearned for the Buddha's attention. If we comfort the sick and extend a helping hand physically, financially, or in other ways, it would be greatly appreciated.

Of course, we should understand that falling sick is a skillful manifestation of Vimalakirti, and in order to demonstrate the profound view that Vimalakirti realized, the Buddha asked his shravaka disciples to pay a visit. While these are all displays of those enlightened beings, it did happen in history, and we should really cherish these teachings. It is for this reason that both Tibetan Buddhism and Han Buddhism attach high importance to this sutra. A deep study of this sutra will enable us not only to grasp the essential meaning of prajnaparamita, but also to taste the profound meaning of the tantric doctrine. We will understand that due to many reasons, shravaka practitioners do have difficulty in going deeply and in mastering such profound teaching. Therefore, instead of quickly skimming the page and picking up some special words, we'd better delve into the text and dig out the deep meaning during the study.

Shariputra's dialogue with Vimalakirti

Shariputra said: "World-Honored One, I am not qualified to call on him and inquire after his health. Why? I remember once in the past, when I was sitting in repose beneath a tree. At the time Vimalakirti came and said to me,

Shariputra dared not undertake this task, and he told the Buddha about his previous encounter with Vimalakirti that had made him reluctant to visit Vimalakirti. Actually, many other

disciples were similarly reluctant because Vimalakirti was noted for his exalted level of view, practice, and realization, which none of the disciples could match. In this sutra their encounters with Vimalakirti are vividly recounted, and between the lines are glimpses of profound tantric doctrines, the Middle Way, and the Prajnaparamita tenets of the Mahayana. As we read their narratives, starting here with Shariputra, we should not skimp them over like reading novels or watching TV; rather, explore the meaning deeply, and ponder: Why is this the case? Why was Shariputra hesitant? Is Vimalakirti's criticism justifiable?

“O Shariputra, you need not take this sitting [in meditation] to be sitting in repose. Sitting in repose is to not manifest body and mind in the triple world—this is sitting in repose.

One day, when Shariputra was sitting at the foot of a tree in the forest, absorbed in contemplation, Vimalakirti came over and said to him: “Reverend Shariputra, you need not take this sitting in meditation to be sitting in repose, this sort of sitting is wrong!” We can imagine Shariputra meditating under a tree, which must be a scene quite majestic and serene. Then, why did Vimalakirti criticize him?

Vimalakirti went on to say that an authentic meditation means to not manifest body and mind in the triple world of desire, form, and formless realms. It means that while in meditative concentration, body and mind should not appear in the three worlds. In the tradition of Shravakayana, there are various meditation methods. In terms of body, one assumes different physical postures, such as the seven-point posture of Vairochana including sitting cross-legged with eyes slightly closed and the two hands in meditation mudra; in terms of mind, one meditates on emptiness, clarity, or the visualization of impurity and many others. All of these methods do have a specific characteristic of concentration in terms of either body or mind, and as long as one is clinging to certain characteristic, one remains in the sphere of the three worlds and cannot attain full enlightenment.

Thus Vimalakirti told Shariputra that this kind of meditative absorption is not genuine because the clinging to any characteristic will fetter one in the three worlds. Only until one is free from all grasping and devoid of attachment to any characteristic of body and mind, can it then be called true meditative absorption. The Mahayana meditation of the highest level is entirely free from any fixation such as on emptiness, clarity, and physical body. When one advances on meditation stages, any and all attachments to body and mind will be abolished. This way of

practice is the genuine meditation, which is also well explained in the Chan tradition such as in the teaching of the *Platform Sutra*, as well as in the tantrayana practice.

To generate the concentration of extinction while manifesting the deportments—this is sitting in repose.

Vimalakirti said that an authentic meditation means to generate the concentration of extinction, or the samadhi of complete cessation, while manifesting the deportments. Shravakas practise meditative absorption to reach complete cessation and then dwell in it. Actually this kind of meditation is not ideal. The perfect meditation is that the concentration of cessation is not lost at all when one engages in all activities of walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, all the while displaying a respect-inspiring deportment. Shravaka's meditation is built on proper physical posture of sitting upright and so forth, and they will lose their samadhi of cessation once they stand up and leave this situation. Actually, true meditative concentration needs to be extended into the post-meditative period—at all times and in all situations, one maintains the profound concentration such that there is no distinction between formal sitting sessions and intervals in between; the two merge as one. Vimalakirti would definitely approve and praise anyone who has attained this meditative state, in which the mind wavers not a bit even in the midst of turbulent activity. Only advanced practitioners can manage this, to have the mind remain utterly imperturbable whatever they are doing. This is talking about the combination of movement and stillness during meditation.

Not to relinquish the Dharma of enlightenment and yet manifest the affairs of [ordinary] sentient beings—this is sitting in repose.

An authentic meditation means that one can manifest the affairs of ordinary beings while not abandoning the Dharma of enlightenment, such as the practice of samatha and vipassana. Outwardly one appears to mingle with worldly people, for instance, reveling in singing and dancing, and becoming involved in dubious conduct such as visiting brothels or doing drugs; inwardly, however, one never departs from mental quiescence and penetrating insight. The eighty-four mahasiddhas of ancient India appeared just as ordinary beings, but their inner realization remained inconceivable. Unavoidably, there are always impostors, as noted by Mipham Rinpoche, who proclaim themselves as great realizers having transcended adopting and rejecting. They may act out crazy behavior while in fact their inner quality is nil, just like any ordinary person.

This is talking about the combination of inside enlightenment and outside behavior during meditation. Indeed, the meditation that Vimalakirti taught here indicates a rather high level of realization in Mahayana practice, as it entails performing the affairs of an ordinary person without abandoning the supreme inner realization. Having merged one's inner and outer beings, one does not stray from the excellent path. Such behaviors do exist in Mahayana practice, and this is what we need to be aware of, otherwise we will become narrow-minded and judgmental.

Generally speaking, the morality and precepts based on the Shravakayana tradition are pure and highly praised. However, if one never learns about the other Buddhist doctrines, just fixes his or her idea on Shravakayana and stubbornly believes that behaviors and practices based only on Shravakayana are correct and thus criticize other traditions, such attitude is quite wrong. We should know that given the broad teachings of Buddhism, different practices can coexist in a compatible manner rather than excluding each other, and in order to benefit various living beings, bodhisattvas may manifest in all different forms as their skillful means to help others.

To have the mind neither abide internally nor locate itself externally—this is sitting in repose.

An authentic meditation means that one's mind neither dwells in internal thoughts, such as shravaka's view of no self or the idea of keeping calm and still, nor settles in external objects of sensory perceptions such as forms, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. Both the *Flower Garland Sutra* and the *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* say: "The mind doesn't abide inwardly, outwardly, or in the middle." *The Way of the Bodhisattva* also has the similar teaching. Therefore, our mind is not confined to inner, outer, or secret places; it dwells nowhere.

This is talking about the realization of the real nature of the mind during meditation. A treatise in the Chan tradition, *Records of the Transmission of the Lamp*, states, "Ordinary beings try to get rid of delusion for the sake of truth. Actually there is no difference between truth and delusion." In absolute reality, neither delusion nor truth exists, but this meaning is difficult to grasp for ordinary folks. Usually people may think that when fixation and delusion are dispelled, the ultimate truth is to be attained. *Introduction to the Middle Way* also says to seek ultimate truth by abandoning relative truth, but it is for pedagogical purpose only. Ultimate truth is not to be found by discarding this in order to attain that. In ultimate truth, there is

nothing attainable, whether from within or outside, whether it is truth or delusion. This is the authentic meditation that Vimalakirti talked about here. Those who have studied *Finding Comfort and Ease in the Nature of Mind* should have a better understanding of this profound meaning.

To be unmoved by the [sixty-two mistaken] views yet cultivate the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment—this is sitting in repose. Not to eradicate the afflictions yet enter into nirvana—this is sitting in repose.

Authentic meditation means to be unmoved by the sixty-two mistaken views that include eternalism, nihilism, and so on, meanwhile to cultivate the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment vigorously. An authentic meditation means not to eradicate the afflictions yet enter into nirvana. In the Shrivakayana tradition, entering nirvana is interpreted as extinguishing greed, aggression, and ignorance to enter a state free from these three root afflictions. But in fact the nature of affliction is none other than the awakened mind, and there is nothing to be cast away. Thus the proposition of eradicating defilements in order to obtain a pure nirvana is unsound.

This line of supposition is also evident in the Chan tradition. The *Records of the Transmission of the Lamp* teaches: “Anyone who tries to eradicate afflictions is actually an ignorant and mindless one. Afflictions are actually bodhi, and other than that there are no Chan meditations one needs to practice.” There are many such excellent Chan mottos. The attempt to eradicate affliction indeed is a type of ignorance itself.

Some practitioners following the sutrayana tradition are likely to object: “Afflictions are what need to be abolished. Only by first cutting off defilements then can nirvana be attained.” As a matter of fact, the essence of greed, aversion, and ignorance is the awakened mind; there is nowhere else to go for enlightenment. This is exactly what the tantrayana teaching entails, so does the Chan tradition. Thus Khenpo bids everyone to bear this point in mind—entering nirvana without abandoning afflictions. It is not by eradicating afflictions first that nirvana becomes reachable, which is the approach of the Shrivakayana tradition. The scriptures describe that Manjusuri, the Bodhisattva of wisdom, disapproves such a practice and advocates the recognition of the true nature of these defilements, which is exactly the awakened mind. Once this recognition is established, Buddhahood is within reach.

“Those who are able to sit in this fashion [will receive] the Buddha’s seal of approval.”

“At the time, World-Honored One, I simply listened to this explanation in silence and was unable to respond. Therefore, I cannot accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness.”

Therefore, simply sitting under a tree cannot be counted as an authentic meditation. It is recognizing the true nature of the mind that renders a meditation authentic, and sitting in this fashion will receive the Buddha’s seal of approval. Vimalakirti offered a sharp critique targeting Shariputra’s problem in meditation. Shariputra, left speechless, had no choice but to accept it. And that’s why Shariputra felt unqualified to visit Vimalakirti and inquire about his illness.

It may seem Vimalakirti was ridiculing poor Shariputra for practicing meditation improperly, but we all need this kind of admonition. We may feel complacent about our own state of meditation. Nonetheless, mired by clinging to external, internal, or secret objects, we can’t maintain the deportments during meditation, we fail to assimilate tranquility with mobility, and we separate outside behavior with inside realization. Moreover, we may stick to the expedient teaching and fail to integrate the lower view with the higher view. Should we meet Vimalakirti today, he would give us the same teachings that always retain its freshness, just like the Buddha’s words.

Vimalakirti feigned illness for special purposes; likewise, it was not without intent that the Buddha urged his disciples to visit this formidable patient. The disciples had encountered Vimalakirti before, in which he chastised each of them for deficiencies in their understanding of the Dharma and gave them specific instructions, some relate to view and practices, others relate to doubts, defilements, and the like. For example, Shariputra was criticized for his meditation approach, and the next disciple, Maudgalyayana, was criticized for his view.

His advice, Khenpo points out, are not meant only for those disciples; rather they apply to all Dharma practitioners. Khenpo hopes that the audience will ponder deeply to fully absorb what the instructions were meant to convey. We should think like this: “Today, when I was practicing meditation with Shariputra, Vimalakirti came around and appraised our practice in this way.” The assessment and instructions of Vimalakirti are also the Buddha’s assessment and instructions to us, since they are the outflow of an enlightened mind.

This story also shows that, when the Buddha asks his disciple to do something, if the disciple feels really difficult to accomplish the task, he can directly express his concern to the Buddha;

and if the reason is rational, the Buddha would not force his disciple to take on the formidable task. Indeed, regarding the relationship between a guru and a disciple, both Tibetan and Han Buddhism follow the tradition that a guru will not make his or her disciple do something that the disciple feels undoable, and the disciple can directly explain the reason to the guru. There is nothing to do with breaking the vow of Mahayana or Vajrayana.

Mahamaudgalyayana's dialogue with Vimalakirti

The Buddha told Mahamaudgalyayana, "You go inquire about Vimalakirti's illness."

Maudgalyayana addressed the Buddha, "World-Honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? I remember once in the past, I had entered the great city of Vaisali and was explaining the Dharma to the retired scholars of a certain neighborhood. At the time Vimalakirti came and said to me,

"O Mahamaudgalyayana, when you explain the Dharma to white-robed retired scholars, you should not explain it as you are now doing. In explaining the Dharma, you should explain according to the Dharma.

Shariputra and Maudgalyayana were the key disciples of the Buddha, Shariputra was most accomplished in wisdom and Maudgalyayana in supernatural powers. Now that Shariputra had declined to visit Vimalakirti, the Buddha then asked Maudgalyayana to go on his behalf. Maudgalyayana also replied the Buddha that he dared not to accept the instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? He recounted his encounter with Vimalakirti once he was giving teachings to householders in the city of Vaisali. Vimalakirti corrected his way of teaching the Dharma to white-robed lay people.

In the Tibetan and Xuanzang's translation version, also in a Japanese version directly translated from the original Sanskrit version, as well as in some other English translation versions, it says that Maudgalyayana entered the great city of Vaishali and in its crowded cross street expounded the Dharma for the lay believers. As we mentioned earlier, there are many available versions of this sutra in different languages, which also indicates that scholars and practitioners in both the East and the West have a keen interest on this sutra.

Presently, there are a number of western audiences who follow the teaching consistently. At the beginning of this course, Khenpo and his team wondered whether it was necessary to

provide simultaneous interpretation for the western audience. But as he said, it was meaningful to facilitate this favorable condition even if only one person was listening. Up to now, Khenpo feels that western audience are persistent in receiving the teachings, and this attitude is quite admirable.

Vimalakirti told Maudgalyayana that he should give teaching according to the Dharma, meaning that Maudgalyayana didn't explain the Dharma according to the true reality. Vimalakirti pointed out various aspects in which Maudgalyayana gave the Dharma teaching improperly to lay practitioners. Firstly, Maudgalyayana hadn't mastered the ultimate truth of phenomena, so he failed to explain the ultimate truth to the listeners; second, he didn't give appropriate teaching according to various different capacities of the listeners; and third, he couldn't convey the secret intention of the Buddha to the listeners because he hadn't grasped the entire meaning of the Dharma.

As one of the Buddha's closest disciples and foremost in the mastery of miraculous powers, we may ponder what kind of teaching Maudgalyayana was giving to the lay practitioners, and why those teachings were improper to the listeners. Basically, Vimalakirti pointed out that for people with greater capacity, the Dharma teacher should not only give them the expedient teaching such as the teaching on suffering, impermanence and so on, because the teaching on the ultimate truth, such as the doctrine of emptiness and prajnaparamita, would bring them great benefits. As a result, Maudgalyayana fully accepted Vimalakirti's advice and sincerely appreciated his profound wisdom.

“The Dharma is without sentient beings because it transcends the defilements of sentient beings; the Dharma is without self because it transcends the defilements of self; the Dharma is without lifespan because it transcends birth and death; and the Dharma is without person because it eradicates the threshold between previous and subsequent [moments].

Vimalakirti first described the four types of grasping to the characteristic of sentient being, self, person, and lifespan. All these four characteristics are negated in the *Diamond Sutra*. According to Kamalasila, “self” is the mere gathering of five aggregates; “a person” is the object that oneself clings to; “sentient beings” is the life stream of a sentient being, for example, that which took rebirth as a human in this life will take rebirth as a deva or as an animal in next life; “lifespan” is the life expectancy of a being, for example, having taken rebirth in the human

realm, one is subject to the rule of how long humans live, and the same parameter applies to all other types of rebirths.

Vimalakirti declared these four characteristics nonexistent. Sentient beings are nonexistent because the true reality of all phenomena transcends the defilements of sentient beings; self is nonexistent because the true reality transcends the defilements of self, and in the Tibetan version, it states as free of the contamination of desire; lifespan is nonexistent because the true reality is beyond birth and death, lacking the continuity of a being; and a person is nonexistent because the true reality eradicates the threshold between previous and subsequent moments. As past origins and future destinies are done away with, it is without a self and nor what the self grasps to.

“The Dharma is permanently serene because it extinguishes the characteristics. The Dharma transcends characteristics because it is without conditions. The Dharma is without names because it eradicates words. The Dharma is without explanation because it transcends discursive thought and reasoning. The Dharma is without the characteristics of form because it is like space. The Dharma is without hypotheses because it is ultimately empty. The Dharma is without the sense of personal possession because it transcends personal possession. The Dharma is without discrimination because it transcends the consciousnesses. The Dharma is incomparable because there is nothing to match it. The Dharma is divorced from causation because it is not located in conditionality.

All phenomena are permanently serene and still because the characteristics of existence and nonexistence, affirmation and negation, are all completely extinguished.

All phenomena are free of any characteristics because there is nothing that can be perceived. The mind as the subject to perceive is nonexistent; it follows that the objects the mind perceives are nonexistent as well.

All phenomena are without names, letters, and designations because their nature cuts off from all language. Prajnaparamita goes beyond the scope of words and thoughts and thus is inconceivable and ineffable.

All phenomena are without explanation because all languages arise from mental experiences and are governed by thoughts and concepts. The true reality of all phenomena, however, transcends the realm of experience, and is inexpressible by words.

All phenomena are without the characteristics or forms, like space, as they are devoid of shapes and features and their essence is not different from empty space.

All phenomena are without hypotheses, or language elaborations, and free of mental construct. Conceptual proliferations such as existence, nonexistence, color, taste, and whatnot, are insubstantial and ultimately empty.

All phenomena are free of the notion of “mine” because the concepts of personal possession are transcended.

All phenomena are beyond discrimination, without the labeling of “this is big”, “this is small”, “this is tall”, “this is short”, and so on, because the real nature transcends the grasping of consciousness. Fixation and grasping are the way how consciousness or the conceptual mind works; but the true reality of all phenomena is free from mental construct.

All phenomena are incomparable because their nature is beyond all relativities. All phenomena arise due to interdependence and, having no intrinsic existence of their own, are empty in nature.

All phenomena are divorced from causation and conditions. Causes and conditions are the source for the arising of all phenomena, but if investigated with wisdom, causality is empty in and of itself, whether in terms of a direct cause or a supporting condition. The *Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* says: “Because there’s nothing that is not dependently arisen, there is nothing that’s not empty.” There is nothing that does not rely on causes and conditions, and anything dependent on causation is empty in nature. Such is the principle of dependent origination that Buddhism proclaims.

All phenomena are no more than mere appearances arising from the convergence of individual causes and conditions. Without examination, they exist in a way like dream images or magical illusions. When properly investigated, the coexistence of cause and effect is unattainable, and a cause cannot give rise to a result at the same moment; nor is the absence of their coexistence attainable, and a cause at the previous moment cannot give rise to a result at the present

moment. To posit that several causes produce a single result cannot be established, nor can a single cause produces several results. By profoundly scrutinizing reality using logical arguments of the Diamond Splinters, the notion of an effect being produced from a cause is determined as merely the product of conceptual mind. Such a refutation can be further asserted by the argument of investigating all, the Reasoning of Great Interdependence in the Middle Way.

By studying commentaries such as *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way*, the Wisdom Chapter of *Bodhicharyavatara*, *Finding Comfort and Ease in the Nature of Mind*, etc., one will have a clear understanding of the ultimate truth of all phenomena. Those who have reflected on the doctrine of the Middle Way or practiced the pith instructions in tantrayana will have a deep conviction and a personal experience of this: “Yes! Such is the true reality of all phenomena!” On the contrary, worldly people lacking any exposure to these teachings will not understand or even feel an aversion toward it.

Without establishing an unwavering conviction in emptiness or Prajnaparamita, we tend to think that these teachings are mere repetitions. Khenpo says that if one has studied *The Root Stanzas of the Middle Way* more than three times, one will gain certainty in the mind’s primordial purity and emptiness that are free of the four extremes and eight elaborations. Khenpo himself has received from his spiritual mentors many pith instructions on the Middle Way that have stayed with him until today. These blessings have made indelible marks in the marrow of his bones which, he believes, will remain with him in all his future lives, in whatever bodies he comes to have.

Therefore, if you understand the philosophy of the Middle Way, you will be deeply moved by these teachings given by Vimalakirti, and it is clear in your mind that all these teachings are really essential, either for your own practice or for a Dharma teacher to give teaching to others. But if you don’t understand the Middle Way at all, probably you will be confused by these teachings.

“The Dharma is identical to Dharma-nature because it inheres in the *dharmas*. The Dharma accords with suchness because it is without anything that accords with it. The Dharma abides in the actual because it is unmoved by the extremes. The Dharma is motionless because it is not dependent on the six types of sensory data. The Dharma is without past and future because it is constantly nonabiding.

All phenomena are identical to Dharma-nature because their real nature is not different with dharmathatu, the basic space of phenomena. Both of them are the timeless state of meditative equipoise. The fundamental nature of meditative equipoise inheres in all phenomena with no separation.

All phenomena always accord with suchness. Whatever phenomenon there is, its reality can be established in the relative truth and in the ultimate truth. In both cases, no phenomenon is ever separated from its unchanging suchness. A phenomenon conforms to reality by way of its nonconforming to anything, thus it is without anything that accords with it.

All phenomena dwell in the actual reality and are unmoved by all extremes, either existence or nonexistence, affirmation or negation. All these extremes are mere conceptual fabrications that we cling to. We believe that they have substantial existence but in reality, whatever we attach to never truly exists.

All phenomena are motionless for their true reality does not depend on the objects of six senses—form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mental objects. When investigated, the sensory data of the six senses are not attainable either.

All phenomena are without past and future, for they have no arising in the beginning or cessation in the end. Having neither arising nor ceasing, it cannot abide in the middle either.

“The Dharma concurs with emptiness, accords with the absence of characteristics, and responds to inactivity. The Dharma transcends good and ugly, the Dharma is without gain and loss, the Dharma is without generation and extinction, and the Dharma is without refuge. The Dharma surpasses eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The Dharma is without high and low. The Dharma abides constantly without moving, and the Dharma transcends all practices of contemplation.

All phenomena embody the three doors of liberation: their true nature concurs with emptiness, their causes are absent of characteristics; their results respond to inactivity and wishlessness.

All phenomena transcend good and bad, beauty and ugliness. In the world, we always perceive people as good or bad, beautiful or ugly. These days many individuals place a high value on looks, which causes the tagging this one as beautiful and that one as ugly. However, if analyzed with wisdom, the human body with its physical parts, shapes, colors, and so on, is made up of

atoms and each atom, ultimately, is empty in nature. Thus, attributes such as being good, bad, pretty, or homely are but tendencies shaped by mental fabrication.

When on the teaching tour in Africa, Khenpo thought about this and asked the local people he met: “In your view, what do the most good-looking men and women look like?” The locals pointed them out for him. Khenpo couldn’t help but think what it would be like should he have taken rebirth in Africa. The Africans asked Khenpo in return: “What is your Asian standard for the most good-looking men and women?” When Khenpo described the physical features to them, they couldn’t agree that they signified beauty.

Rebirth into the animal realm will stipulate us with a different set of characteristics and propensities. As for now, we are in the human realm and, as long as we have this human body, our common inclination as human beings will stay with us. Later, when we are reborn in another kind of body, the habitual tendencies that accord with that particular body will resurface in us.

However, fundamentally speaking, none of the so-called good, bad, beautiful, ugly, increasing, or decreasing has ever come into being. All phenomena are without generation and extinction, and without destination; there is no point to arrive at or any entity arriving. They are constantly without moving and have never wavered from their true nature. All phenomena transcend the range of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and thought, and their nature is without highness and lowness. Superficially, in Buddhism there are lesser and greater vehicles, but labels are simply applied to facilitate understanding. For instance, the *Lotus Sutra* introduces three vehicles in the beginning, which is followed by one vehicle and, in the end, even the one vehicle is abolished.

Whether the buddhas have appeared or not, the nature of all phenomena is timelessly without activity, unmoving and unchanging. All phenomena transcend any contemplation and practice; they forsake all effortful activities; they involve neither a perceiver nor a perceived.

“O Mahamaudgalyayana, with characteristics such as these, how can the Dharma be explained? Explaining the Dharma should be without explaining and without indicating. Listening to the Dharma should be without listening and without attaining.

“It is like a magician explaining the Dharma to conjured people.

Vimalakirti asked Mahamaudgalyayana: “Reverend Mahamaudgalyayana, all phenomena have such characteristics, how can the Dharma be explained?” When explaining the Dharma, actually there is nothing to expound, and nothing to signify. Listening to the Dharma is also without hearing and without attaining. Just like a magician explaining the Dharma to the people who are conjured up, the authentic way to expound the Dharma is teaching the Dharma while without any attachment. Everything should be regarded as illusory, devoid of an inherent existence.

Khenpo emphasized that as indicated here, when we have opportunity to give the Dharma teaching to others, it is better to focus on the doctrine of ultimate truth, such as the teachings on emptiness, prajnaparamita, the Great Perfection and so on. In this way, the listeners will be delighted as they are greatly benefitted by exposing themselves in the true reality. Of course, the teachers are also required to have certain level of conviction or realization on these ultimate teachings, obtained through either theoretical understanding or personal practice, so that their teachings can transfer powerful blessings to the listeners.

“One should have such a mindset in explaining the Dharma. One should comprehend that the faculties of sentient beings [include both] sharp and dull. You would do well to be without hindrances in your knowledge and vision. Use the mind of great compassion and praise the Mahayana. Remember to recompense the kindness of the Buddha and do not cut off the Three Jewels. Thus should you explain the Dharma.

Vimalakirti admonished Mahamaudgalyayana: “You should expound the Dharma based on the profound wisdom of emptiness, otherwise it would be meaningless.” Vimalakirti further elaborated that for expounding the Dharma to sentient beings, one should meet the following qualifications:

First, one should comprehend that the faculties of sentient beings include both sharp and dull. The teaching must be given according to the capacities of the audiences and cannot be generalized. To be sure, not everyone is ready to accept the profound wisdom of emptiness; thus no matter how hard you try to teach, your effort may be in vain.

Second, one would do well to be without hindrances in one’s knowledge and vision. In other words, one should cultivate unhindered insight that penetrates the empty nature of all phenomena. At the very least one needs to comprehend the doctrine of emptiness.

Third, one's mind is steeped in great compassion, and one should not seek fame and profit when teaching the Dharma. The exalted Dromtonpa said: "I'm a person seeking liberation, thus not bound by worldly gains." Great masters pursue only liberation, and it is only out of compassion that they bestow the Dharma teachings.

Fourth, praise the Mahayana. The Mahayana doctrine contains the ultimate truth of all phenomena, whether relating to its profound and vast tenet or its skillful activities in benefiting sentient beings. Always be eager to praise Mahayana Buddhism.

Fifth, remember to recompense the kindness of the Buddha. Had the Buddha not turned the Wheel of the Dharma three times, sentient beings would still be trapped in the suffering ocean of samsara to no end. Therefore, to make available the Buddha's wisdom to sentient beings is the only way to repay the great kindness of the Buddha. When spreading the Dharma, never become sullied by self-promotion, but rather acknowledge the Buddha's immense benevolence to us.

Sixth, establish pure motivation. When one endeavors in spreading the Dharma teaching, the sole concern should be the welfare of sentient beings.

Seventh, preach the Dharma with the highest efficiency, lacking none of the four perfect knowledges—perfect knowledge of meaning, perfect knowledge of Dharma, perfect knowledge of language, and perfect knowledge of courageous eloquence.

Eighth, do not cut off the Three Jewels. We must propagate the Dharma to ensure that the Three Jewels will keep radiating its light throughout the darkness of the world. It is vital that we preserve the brilliance of the Three Jewels and always pray to them.

As Patrul Rinpoche teaches in *The Word of My Perfect Teacher*, if one does not bother to supplicate to Three Jewels regularly, external environments are so seductive, the mind so gullible and thoughts so quick to deceive, that, even while one is doing good and has generated some devotion, this can easily turn into something negative. Obstacles to Dharma practice come in many forms and destroy accumulated virtue. The antidote to these problems is to strive to take refuge in the Three Jewels from the bottom of our heart. The blessings of the Three Jewels are indeed inconceivable. Always pray to the Three Jewels so that their wisdom, compassion, and power will shine forever!

The sixth and seventh points are mentioned in the Tibetan version. In Mahayana Buddhism, the motivation of teaching the Dharma should cover all these eight points. Shravaka practitioners may fail to meet these requirements due to their limited vision and insight. Maudgalyayana was sharply criticized due to his lack of knowledge about the various capacities of the audience, and his teaching only focused on the Shravakayana.

“When Vimalakirti explained this Dharma, eight hundred retired scholars generated the intention to achieve *anuttara sam yak sambodhi*. I lack this eloquence. Therefore I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

Maudgalyayana related to the Buddha: “When Vimalakirti explained this Dharma, eight hundred householders in the crowd set their minds on seeking supreme enlightenment. I lack this eloquence and I am, therefore, unfit to call on him to inquire about his health.”

Lecture 15

Delve into the Dharma Study Deeply

Before giving the teaching, Khenpo emphasized the importance of receiving the oral transmission. Some people may underappreciate its value on various grounds such as not knowing Tibetan or it is alright to miss a few minutes of a two-hour lecture. Actually, the Tibetan oral transmission is hard and rare to obtain widely around the world. Many practitioners in Western countries, as well as scholars and scientists, attach such great importance to the empowerment and oral transmission that they are willing to plan ahead their schedule for three or four years to complete certain teachings. Gladly, students in Han area have also gradually taken the empowerment and oral transmission in a high regard. Of course, one must treat oral transmission and dharma study in an equal manner, which is a rational way of studying the Buddha's teachings.

After finishing each lecture, Khenpo hopes everyone will not put aside books but read notes and other master's teachings, be it in English, Chinese or Tibetan, compare different versions of translation, and refer to the commentaries of some great masters in history, such as Master Seng Zhao and Kuiji. That will be as an active way of learning.

For Khenpo himself, as he said, "With all-day long meetings and tedious chores, I have made my best effort to prepare for teaching. I read and compare Chinese and Tibetan versions of the sutra before teaching, and also ask others to look up versions of other languages to clear away doubts."

Students at Larung Gar have made an exemplary of studying. They set up tutoring sessions after classes, so that students can discuss what they have learned, go through the details, and as a result develop a deeper understanding. In this fashion, one should be able to truly understand the profound meaning that is buried deep in the *Vimalakirti Sutra* by the end of this course. Some may even generate the irreversible confidence towards emptiness and non-dualism through studying such a valuable sutra. We do need to delve in the sutra rather than scratch the surface.

In this age of information, either in the East or the West, everyone has a limited amount of time available because it is quickly consumed. Therefore, people cannot afford to waste time.

Although in such a hurry, we are responsible in setting aside precious time for Dharma teachings and to study hard. It is important to put emphasis on learning the Dharma. Moreover, learning the Dharma is not merely about attending a class, reading a book or gaining some new knowledge. It is more about aligning our mind with Buddha's profound wisdom which has spanned a period of 2,500 years. It is indeed a privilege for us to listen to and study the marvelous Dharma and bring extraordinary meaning to our life. The same journey has been set forth by other wise men all over the world. On the contrary, it would be meaningless if we do not bother to contemplate its profound meanings, but rather linger on its expressions or, even less, be pro forma Buddhists.

All in all, attitude is everything. Each lecture lasts less than 2 hours and as long as no emergency happens, we should complete each lecture, obtain oral transmission and blessing, as well as the profound meanings of the Dharma. The Dharma is hard to comprehend even for the wise, not mention to those of less wisdom, who must find it impossible to understand, and even harder if they are distracted in mind and careless in actions.

Who is Mahakashyapa?

Although appearing as a layman, Vimalakirti had extraordinary achievements, which far surpassed those in Shrivakayana and some sects of Mahayana. To some extent, his view is identical to that of the highest teachings of Vajrayana or the Chan school. With wisdom or through in-depth learning, we can see, without a doubt, his achievements.

Previously, Buddha Shakyamuni asked Shariputra, the disciple of the greatest wisdom, and Maudgalyayana, the disciple of the most miraculous power, to inquire about Vimalakirti's illness. However, both of them dared not, as they were admonished by Vimalakirti when they were preaching and meditating. Next, Buddha Shakyamuni respectively asked Kashyapa, the disciple of the best ascetic practices, and Subhuti, the disciple of the best comprehension on emptiness, to inquire about Vimalakirti's illness.

From the perspective of the pratimoksa vows, Kashyapa had kept pure precepts, like today's Theravada monks. Kashyapa preserves a dignified bearing of content and ascetic look. He was an example of twelve ascetic practice, as he wore rags, ate coarse food, rested beneath trees, meditated through nights, etc. Impelled by compassion, Kashyapa often begged alms from the poor so that they could sow the seed of liberation.

Subhuti, on the other hand, was best in comprehending emptiness among all disciples. He was not bound by attachments, and his conversations with the Buddha and Manjushri on emptiness appear in many sutras such as *The Diamond Sutra*. Unlike Kashyapa, he usually went to the rich's places to beg for food, in order to tame their arrogance and stinginess. So his alms givers were mainly big bosses, rich merchants and the elders.

We know that in the Nyingma tradition, the view mainly follows the doctrine of emptiness preached by Nagarjuna, and the conduct mainly follows the pratimoksa vows promoted by Shantarakshita. Similarly, Kashyapa was a well-recognized representative of the pratimoksa vows while Subhuti of the view of emptiness. However, they were both admonished by Vimalakirti, or one can say, received pith instructions from Vimalakirti.

Kashyapa was also one of the seven successors that the Buddha entrusted with the Dharma. Before Buddha Shakyamuni entered parinirvana, he chose Kashyapa to pass on the Dharma; later, Kashyapa passed the Dharma on to Ananda and the sutrayana lineage carries on until today. This history can be found in Dudjom Rinpoche's *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism*.

After Buddha Shakyamuni entered parinirvana, Kashyapa went into meditation in the Mount Jizu and remains there until the next Buddha, Maitreya, is born. Then Buddha Maitreya will bring his disciples to Mount Jizu to visit him. Buddha Maitreya will place Kashyapa on his palm and tell the congregation, "This is the honorable Kashyapa, he is from the era of Buddha Shakyamuni. Look, he is wearing the robe that Buddha Shakyamuni gave him. Now he is going to arise from the state of meditation and turn the Dharma wheel for us..."

Mahakashyapa's dialogue with Vimalakirti

The Buddha told Mahakashyapa, "You go inquire about Vimalakirti's illness."

Kashyapa addressed the Buddha, "World-honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? I remember once in the past, when I was begging in a poor neighborhood, Vimalakirti came and said to me,

"O Mahakashyapa, you have the mind of sympathy and compassion but are unable [to apply it] universally. You have abandoned the wealthy to beg from the poor.

The Buddha told Kashyapa to go and inquire about Vimalakirti's illness. Kashyapa rejected the Buddha with reverence, and he recalled Vimalakirti's teaching to him in a previous encounter when he was begging in a poor neighborhood. The reason was that his compassion was not universal, as he preferred the poor when begging for food.

Similar to Kashyapa, some practitioners today tend to avoid the rich, thinking that the rich may hinder their Dharma practice. Some may praise, "This monk is excellent because he does not like money." Actually, it is also a sign of partiality from the perspective of Mahayana teaching. Their practice of compassion and sympathy are not applied universally since the wealthy are left aside.

This situation is commonly seen in Tibetan, Chinese, and Theravada practitioners. Some monasteries of the Vinaya School put a lot of emphasis on asceticism. The cloth has to be boiled and washed again and again so that there is no sheen on it; few seasoning is used in food to keep it plain; the speech should be gentle and soft whispers, etc. If one wears a robe that is too bright, the abbot will be offended: "Why are you dressed like a rich man?" However, it is hard to tell if a practitioner's mind is as simple as his or her appearance. All in all, the key point is that the body, speech and mind should be in concordance. Vimalakirti may not be overly happy with practitioners who have a strong grasp on their external behaviors.

“Kashyapa, while abiding in the Dharma of universal sameness, you should proceed in sequence in your begging.

Vimalakirti told Kashyapa, "That's not right. You should abide in the universal sameness and be impartial to both the poor and the rich. In ultimate truth, there is no difference between the rich and the poor, the good and the bad, the bright and the dark. They are all equal in nature. Therefore, you should not particularly pick one neighborhood rather than the other."

Practitioners who are good at cultivating their minds, unselfish, relaxed, and open-minded, do not really have a strong grasp on most of things. Some people long for perfection, but too much attachment to perfection would put them in a state of anxiety, inequality and unreasonableness. Here Vimalakirti's exhortation to Kashyapa is also a good advice for us followers. We should not attach ourselves strongly to any external characteristic. This sutra contains many pith instructions as powerful antidotes to our mental afflictions. Sometimes we may think we are good practitioners and on the right track, but when measured with a higher standard in the sutrayana doctrine, we still find we have fallen to a certain extreme.

So Vimalakirti suggested Kashyapa to proceed in sequence in his begging, regardless of whether the alms giver is rich or poor. Impartiality means not to discriminate between differences. In true reality, all phenomena, including every sentient being, are perfectly equal and without any difference. As it is stated in the *Bodhisattvas' Noble Precepts Sutra*, “With an impartial mind, bodhisattvas treat every being equally, drawing no distinction between the noble or the humble, the elite or the inferior.” Because the minds of all living beings are equal and abide in a perfect union of emptiness and luminosity, what ordinary people see as rich, poor, high, low, noble, or ignoble does not truly exist at all.

Even in everyday life, we can see that being rich or poor is not unchangeable. People living in poverty this year could be billionaires the next. A Chinese saying goes that the Yellow River would change course and flow to the other side of the village every 30 years. It used to be 30 years but nowadays I think 3 years is not too short to have any dramatic change. In modern society, the rise and fall of a family can take place in less than 3 days. Some people win lottery and get rich in 3 hours, and they feel like they are in heaven. While some people fall to poverty in 3 hours and no one serves them or cares about them anymore. So we cannot stick to the state of being rich or poor, because it could change very quickly.

People like to judge a book by its cover, especially in China. If a monk wears ragged clothes, people think he is a very good practitioner; if a monk wear a good robe, people start to have some criticism. Actually if you have inner realizations, it does not matter what you are wearing; if not, even when your clothes are extremely tatty and old, you are still not a good practitioner because your ego is not shattered at all.

“It is because of not eating that you should practice begging.

In many commentaries, “not eating”, as well as the “destruction” and “not receiving” in the following text, is explained as the state of nirvana, because once one has attained nirvana, there is no need to have food. It is in order to attain nirvana that one should beg for food, so as to maintain the physical body for the spiritual practice.

So Vimalakirti suggested to Kashyapa that he abandon the mere thought that he wants to have good food and nourish his physical body during begging. Instead, he should think that in order to attain nirvana, the body of Dharmakaya, he relies on this impermanent and illusory physical body to practice the Dharma. It seems to beg for food, indeed it is for nirvana, the state of not eating that it begs. This teaching is truly meaningful for everyone.

“It is because of the destruction of one’s physical integrity that you should take that lump of food. It is because of not receiving that you should receive that food.

The physical integrity means the five aggregates. We regard the combination of bones, flesh, muscles, blood and so on as our body and have strong attachment to it. In order to destruct such attachment, we follow the spiritual path and taking the lump of food is only for this reason.

The “lump of food” in some commentaries is explained as having meals in different periods. For example, human beings have food three times a day, breakfast, lunch and dinner, while animals such as yaks and sheep are different as they can eat all the time. Some other commentaries say “lump of food” means the way India and Tibetan people eat with their hands. In either case, we should know that it is for the attainment of nirvana that we take food.

Furthermore, one should receive alms with the realization of emptiness of three concepts, i.e., the emptiness of giving, the emptiness of receiving, and the emptiness of alms. Here talks about the basic needs of human beings. As Confucius said in the *Classic of Rites*, food and sex embody the great desires of human beings, and death, poverty, and suffering are what people greatly dislike. Nowadays movies and TV shows mostly focus on relationship and food, but not many people have the courage to discuss life and death. Basically, food, sex, life and death are what the human life is all about. So here Vimalakirti reminded Kashyapa how to receive food.

When we eat, it is important to remind ourselves that it is because we need to practice the Dharma and benefit sentient beings that we maintain and nourish this physical body. It is not sensible to blindly imitate the ascetics and not eat or drink. The *Four Hundred Verses of Middle Way* says that sometimes the body should be seen as enemies; on the other hand, it is important to protect this body and take care of it in order to practice the Dharma. We should not go to extremes, neither torture our bodies like ascetics, nor be strongly attached to them. The physical body is a compounded phenomenon of the five aggregates, and the attachment to it should be destroyed eventually.

Khenpo says that he does not have much attachment to his body and it is alright to live a long life for the sake of teaching the Dharma. Besides this reason, he does not care too much how long or how healthy he will live. As he said, “When I am sick and have to take shots, it hurts but my attachment to the body is not that strong. It does not matter if I pass away or not, as the body is just an illusory phenomenon.”

In fact, by studying Mahayana Buddhism, one can realize the nature of physical body, and thus give up the attachment to it. Just like having a friend, once you have noticed what a terrible person he or she is, you will no longer cling to your friendship. The same goes to our body. What is this body made of? How long can it last? Through careful observation we should find the answer. Therefore, to receive the food is not for eating, but for the only purpose of breaking the grasp on this compounded illusion.

“You should enter a village with the idea that it is an empty aggregation.

One should enter a city, a town, or a village without any grasping, because their nature is impermanent, empty, and has no solid existence. In the Tibetan and Xuanzang’s translation version, there is one more line: “In order to mature the minds of men, women, the young, and the old, one should enter a city, while seeing it as a buddha’s home.” It means that one should recognize the true reality of a city while benefiting others, which is unconditionally empty and without any characteristic.

Some good practitioners, after living and practicing in remote mountains for some time, would achieve certain level of realization on emptiness. However, some people who have spent a long time in solitary places may become very excited when they go back to cities, since they are attached to sensory pleasure and enjoyment and do not see cities as empty aggregates. Also, there are others who would go to another extreme and refuse to meet people even when they go back to cities. They just stay with themselves and chant mantras, leaving others with a weird impression. Indeed, no matter whether one has any inner realization or not, when one has left the solitary place and entered a city, it is better to blend in and interact with people in a normal way. Inside one may abide in the fourth level of meditative state, but outside one needs to act like others. This is quite important.

“The forms you see are equivalent to [what] the blind [see]; the sounds you hear are equivalent to echoes. The fragrances you smell are equivalent to the wind;

Vimalakirti further gave the following teachings from the aspects of six consciousness. He told Kashyapa: “Do not attach to what you see, thinking this is beautiful and that is ugly. Just as a blind man does not discriminate forms, you should regard all of them as the same. When you hear anything, it is just like hearing echoes, which do not make you happy, sad or angry. They are just dependently arising phenomena without any real existence, so do not cling to what you hear. When you smell something, either pleasurable or stinky, they are all equal, just like the

wind. The wind does not stay, and goes away quickly.” Here “fragrances” does not only mean aroma, but all the different scents.

In fact, all these teachings are also applied in the practice of Dzogchen. Everything that appears in front of our six sensory faculties, either good or bad, is equal. Practitioners should experience them with such attitude. For example, during some empowerments, H.H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche first played beautiful music and then some scratchy sound, then he asked the disciples to carefully observe the two types of sound. Next he asked the disciples to touch some really rough cloth and then some smooth silk, again to carefully observe the two types of touch. Then he asked the disciples to smell roses, followed by garbage. This is a good way to observe and understand that the nature of all things is indeed equal. The six objects that we perceive with six sensory faculties are all equal, but it is our conceptual thoughts that label them and develop all kinds of emotions such as hatred, misery, happiness, joyfulness, etc.

Today either in the East or the West, there are many meditative practices designed for modern people. They are a bit close to the emptiness meditation in Mahayana. Many people feel such practice is so amazing and they would pay a lot for it. In fact, such training are available in Mahayana Buddhism and are totally free to learn.

The flavors you taste should not be discriminated; Your tactile sensations are like the realizations of wisdom; and you should understand that the *dharmas* are like phantasms. That which is without self-nature and without other-nature originally was not burning and will not become extinguished now.

Any flavor that we taste should not be discriminated and labeled as delicious or awful. In some meditation practices, people are asked to taste all different flavors, spicy, salty, and sweet, experience them attentively and think about these tastes. Some westerners are very picky about food, but after practicing the meditation over and over, they start to realize that all different tastes are formed by conceptual thoughts and lack true existence.

Dzogchen practices are very straightforward in recognizing the nature of mind. Those who have learned the Vajrayana teaching must have known this. While the teaching methods are different, the destination is the same when you see the nature of all things.

Whether we feel rough or smooth, heavy or light, comfortable or uncomfortable, they are different only because of our conceptual mind, and their nature is the same. So apply the

wisdom of emptiness to all our tactile feelings. People who really want to get tattoos endure the pain bravely as if not feeling it at all. This is an obvious evidence that feelings are inseparable from our thoughts.

Finally, all mental objects perceived by our minds are just like a dream, an illusion, a mirage, a phantasm, or a reflection. There is no inherent existence whenever they appear. Everything is without self-nature, not generated by itself; also without other-nature, not generated by others. Thus everything cannot be generated by both itself and others; and also everything cannot be generated without a cause. Therefore, we can conclude that all phenomena are originally unborn. As Nargajuna says in his *The Root Stanzas on the Middle Way*,

*Not from itself nor from something else,
Not from both and not without a cause,
Does anything whatever,
Anywhere, at any time, arise.*

Given that nothing is generated from itself, from others, or from both itself and others, and nothing is generated without a cause, we know that nothing is truly generated. The fact that everything is beyond these four types of generation can be related to a fire. A fire which originally burns will later extinguish. But if it never burns, certainly there is no cessation. Since everything has no generation, just like a fire which never burns, it will not become extinguished. Nothing ceases because nothing is generated, as cessation is based on generation.

Fire and fuel is discussed in the 10th chapter of *The Root Stanzas on the Middle Way*. Relatively speaking, we can burn a piece of wood with fire. But when observed with wisdom, burning and the burnable, i.e., fire and fuel, are just interdependent with each other and do not have any inherent existence. Similarly, all phenomena perceived by six consciousnesses and the six consciousnesses that can perceive are equally lacking true existence.

This view is indeed similar to the tantric teachings. As Khenpo said, “For those who are unwilling or too busy to complete the preliminary practice and receive empowerments, but still want to receive tantric teachings, I think this sutra is a best teaching. The tantric teachings are more or less revealed in this sutra. But if one does not have devotion, this sutra still cannot benefit you.”

In the West, some gurus would give out Vajrayana teachings without the requirement of preliminary practices. Khenpo has a concern regarding such behavior. He thinks that we'd better be more conservative in regards to such reforms or innovations. Even the lineage gurus do not have the right to abandon the tradition and create something new. All the Dharma teachings are inherited from them. It is impossible that our lineage gurus lacked the wisdom to see the necessity of reform and innovation. Therefore, if we want to study or spread the Dharma, we should follow the footprints of our lineage gurus such as Longchenpa and Jigme Lingpa. Their way of completing preliminary practices, receiving empowerment, and later giving tantric teachings and transmissions to their disciples should be respected and maintained by us followers.

Many gurus in Tibetan monasteries are very strict and serious concerning their lineage. This is praiseworthy. Being open-minded does not mean making groundless choices; and freedom does not mean doing whatever one wants. If doing whatever one wants is freedom, then the madmen have the most freedom. But do you trust them?

“Kashyapa, if you are able to enter the eight emancipations without renouncing the eight perversions, using the characteristic of perversion to enter into the correct Dharma, and using a single meal to give to all, making offerings to the buddhas and the assembly of worthies and sages—only then should you eat.

Vimalakirti said to Kashyapa, it is good if you can enter the eight emancipations without renouncing the eight perversions. Here the eight emancipations are the eightfold Noble Path, and their opposite are the eight perversions, i.e., wrong view, wrong thought, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness and wrong concentration. Vimalakirti meant to enter into the true Dharma by using the characteristics of the eight perversions. According to the Shravakayana tradition, the correct eightfold path cannot be mingled with the eight perversions, so one has to renounce the eight perversions and then follow the eight Noble Path. For example, you have to give up the wrong view to gain the right view, you have to give up the wrong livelihood to gain the right livelihood, etc. But according to the Mahayana teaching, achieving the right view is exactly within the entrance into the wrong view. It is quite special. Ultimately speaking, the nature of right views and that of wrong views are the same. For example, the *Dharani Sutra of the Guarding of the Country* says:

Practicing Dharma and pursuing worldly life,

These two activities are also identical.

And virtuous and non-virtuous deeds

Are seen no difference with Nirvana too.

This is also taught in the *Root Stanzas on the Middle Way*, saying that nirvana and mundane world have no difference. On the relative level, the ten virtues and ten non-virtues are not possible to be equal. However, there is no difference between them in true reality. We should know that the Mahayana doctrines surpass the teachings of Shravakayana, as well as the teachings of the human and god vehicle. As Buddhists, it is necessary to learn the advanced philosophy in Buddhism. If we always take the teachings for gaining merit to be reborn in human and god realms, or even some worldly and banal things, then we will fail to taste even a tiny flavor of the genuine Buddhist wisdom.

Vimalakirti further said, receiving alms with such a sense of equality, and then having the food, thus during this procedure being able to practice generosity to all living beings and meanwhile making offerings to all the buddhas of the past, the future, and the present, as well as the assembly of all sages from the first to the tenth bhumi, this is an authentic way of begging for alms and eating food.

So the key instruction that Vimalakirti gave to Kashyapa is equality. We should also bear in mind! Equality exists between nirvana and samsara, between enlightened beings and deluded beings, between purity and impurity. All phenomena are equal by their nature. In the Dzogchen teachings, it can be called the natural freedom of equality, as we have studied Longchenpa's *Trilogy of Natural Freedom*, i.e., *Natural Freedom of Reality*, *Natural Freedom of the Nature of Mind* and *Natural Freedom of Equality*. If we dig into Vimalakirti's teaching deeper, it is about the natural freedom of equality.

“To eat in this fashion is neither to have the afflictions nor to transcend the afflictions, it is neither to enter into concentration nor to arise from concentration, it is neither to abide in the world nor to abide in nirvana.

Begging for food and eating it in equality is neither having afflictions, nor staying away from afflictions. Ordinary beings have afflictions while shravakas and pratyekabuddhas stay away from afflictions. Ordinary people believe that afflictions do exist, but in fact they are without any true existence. Shravakas and pratyekabuddhas believe that one needs to get rid of afflictions; only when being free from all afflictions can one attain the ultimate enlightenment,

so they grasp mere emptiness as the ultimate truth. These are all extremes. Then what is the Mahayana point of view? It is neither to have afflictions nor to be free from afflictions, neither both of them nor something else. On the ultimate level, everything is beyond conceptual elaborations and extremes; on the relative level, everything appears like a dream or illusion.

Eating is neither to enter into the state of concentration nor to arise from concentration. Ordinary people usually eat without meditative concentration while shravakas or pratyekabuddhas enter into meditation before and after eating. But from Mahayana point of view, both are extremes. Similarly, ordinary people live in the mundane world while shravakas and pratyekabuddhas abide in the nirvana of complete cessation. Both of them fall into extremes and fail to recognize the true reality.

“Where there is charity, there are neither great nor small blessings, neither benefit nor harm. This is the correct entry into the path of buddhahood, without relying on the Shravaka [vehicle].

If one begs for alms in such a way of equality, then the benefactors who gave alms will attain the same merits. It is because one has realized the equality of emptiness, so the merit, or the blessings the alms-givers gain will not be limited by the size of their offering. Greater offering will not bring them greater blessings and smaller offering will not bring them smaller blessings. Instead, they will equally gain the same blessings. In the Tibetan version it also says that there are neither middling nor special blessings.

“Benefit” here means addition, that is, something originally does not exist at all, but one believes the otherwise. For example, self does not exist but one thinks it does. “Harm” here means reduction, which is to deny what exists. For example, someone keeps pure precepts but rumor has it that he does not have. Or making offerings can generate merit but one thinks it does not. When the beneficiary has realized the equality of emptiness, the alms-givers will receive the same merits. There will be no great, no small, no middling or special merits. Also, the alms-givers will not develop any wrong view regarding addition or reduction. This is correct entry onto the path of Buddhahood, rather than relying on the vehicle of shravaka and pratyekabuddha.

“Kashyapa, if you can eat according to this [understanding] then you will not render void the charity of those who feed you.’

Vimalakirti said to Kashyapa, “If you have the view of equality, you will not waste the charity of those alms-givers. However, without such a high level of realization, even if you have kept pure precepts, it is difficult to meet the requirements of accepting the offerings.”

Generally speaking, the offerings from benefactors are hard to consume. In Han Buddhism a saying goes: “The food given by lay Buddhists is hard to digest.” If one has the view of equality and emptiness, one can accept as much as one wishes to take. On the contrary, if one neither has such a right view, nor observes pure precepts, then this person will have to pay dearly afterwards. As the saying goes, “A single grain of rice from the alms-giver is larger than Mount Sumeru. If you cannot attain enlightenment in this life, you will have to be reborn as an animal with fur and horns to pay the debt.” So as ordained Dharma practitioners, if we have not sincerely practiced the Dharma and achieved certain level of realization, it is very possible that in our future lives we will repay the debt in the form of animals. That is very scary.

Therefore, Vimalakirti told Kashyapa that if he had the view of non-duality and equality, then the food offered to him would not be wasted, and that is the genuine way of begging for food in Mahayana Buddhism.

“At the time, World-honored One, the explanation I heard was unprecedented to me, and I immediately generated a profound sense of reverence for all bodhisattvas. I also thought, ‘This householder’s eloquence and wisdom being as they are, how could anyone who hears him not generate the intention to achieve anuttara samyaksambodhi? From now on I will never exhort anyone to undertake the practices of Shravaka or pratyekabuddha.’ Therefore I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.

Kashyapa was originally following the Shravakayana teaching, but once he had understood the ultimate view of emptiness, he immediately generated deep faith on the Mahayana teaching, and aroused a profound sense of reverence for all bodhisattvas. As a result, he showed his sincere devotion to the Elder Vimalakirti, and was so impressed by his profound wisdom and remarkable eloquence.

A wise person will learn a lot just from a single lesson. If we were there, we might not feel this way and still hold doubts whether Vimalakirti’s teaching was reasonable or not. When we go to lectures, if the speaker delivers it well, we will be impressed and even ask for his or her autography afterwards. If the lecture is very boring, we may just leave and forget about it. But

during this encounter with Kashyapa, Vimalakirti's teaching was so wonderful that anyone who heard him would generate the intention to achieve buddhahood.

From then on, Kashyapa never encouraged anyone to follow the practices of shravaka or pratyekabuddha but highly praised Mahayana instead. In the *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels*, it says,

*The Sharvakas are like the stars at night,
While the Bodhisattvas are like the full moon,
Whom, in order to benefit sentient beings,
Show them the way to attain Parinirvana.*

This sutra explained many differences between Mahayana and Shravakayana. For example, shravakas and pratyekabuddhas are like the stars, which cannot dispel the darkness at night; while bodhisattvas are like the full moon. Because bodhisattvas have great compassion towards all sentient beings, they always manifest various ways of entering nirvana. Nirvana does not necessarily mean passing away. It also means enlightenment, accomplishment, wisdom, etc. Although Kashyapa was a shravaka, after hearing the teachings of Vimalakirti, he never exhorted anyone to follow the practice of shravaka. Instead, he focused on promoting the Mahayana teaching.

Due to Vimalakirti's great eloquence and wisdom, Kashyapa dared not go to inquire about his illness. This is a very meaningful teaching for everybody. Khenpo hopes that after studying the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, many people will gain a new insight about the philosophy of the Middle Way in Mahayana Buddhism.

Lecture 16

In the previous narratives, Shariputra was criticized for his approach to meditation; Maudgalyayana for his way of preaching the Dharma; and even the most esteemed disciple Mahakashyapa was instructed to cultivate the view of equality when begging for food. In drawings, Vimalakirti is usually depicted as an old person wearing layman's robes with a long beard. Probably because he possessed prestigious status and was highly respected by the king, ministers, the elders, and many others, people tend to believe he is an aged man. Anyway, Vimalakirti is undoubtedly a great bodhisattva and an exemplary lay practitioner. As we know, in Buddhism, being ordained or not, will not determine one's level of realization. A lay practitioners' enlightenment can be extraordinarily supreme, while it is also possible for an ordained person to fail to understand the Buddha's secret intention, or even worse, to behave not in accordance with the Dharma. Such phenomena existed from the time of Buddha.

During the course of studying this sutra, we should approach its profound and subtle meaning from the perspective of the ultimate truth. Indeed, among numerous scriptures in the Sutrayana tradition, such a sutra, that directly expounds the ultimate truth, is very rare. Vimalakirti powerfully and pointedly addresses the finer points of the Dharma pertaining to its definitive meaning. If we have a solid foundation in the doctrines of both Mahayana and Vajrayana, we can easily identify with the spirit and teachings of Vimalakirti. Otherwise, for some beginners or those who have never studied the Buddhist philosophy, this sutra may seem unfathomable. The following teaching that Vimalakirti gave to Subhuti could be good evidence.

Indeed, it is not without any causes or conditions that one is eager to receive and follow the profound Mahayana teaching. Generally speaking, if one has cultivated deep wisdom, or made auspicious connections with the Mahayana teaching in previous lives, then this person will have the opportunity to study the Dharma and further engage in practice in this life. Otherwise, no matter how wonderful and beneficial the Dharma is, without any causes and conditions, people can hardly accept it, not to mention persevering with it.

Therefore, since we must have accumulated favorable causes and conditions in the past such that at present we are studying this sutra, and even feel an affinity for it, Khenpo encourages us to persevere in our studies as the stories unfold, one after the other, with ever increasing depth and charm. Although people have various values and traditions, the most meaningful thing that we need to cherish in this short life is the path toward liberation and enlightenment,

as it will bring tremendous benefits to us from life to life. Such wisdom is indispensable in the long journey of our life.

The teachings Vimalakirti gave to each disciple in this chapter are truly valuable. During the study, we need to receive the teaching with sincere devotion, humbleness and great joy, not being influenced by any arrogance, bias, or personal preference. Khenpo himself has said, “Although I don’t have any profound enlightenment, as the Tibetan saying goes, ‘An old dog can never spit out gold from its mouth’. I do spend much time on and carefully refer to commentaries of great masters, and also use the Sanskrit version, Tibetan version and Xuanzang’s version as my cross-references. Thus my teaching can be a good aid for scholars in their research and for practitioners in their spiritual practice.”

Subhuti’s dialogue with Vimalakirti

The Buddha told Subhuti, “You go inquire about Vimalakirti’s illness.”

At this point, the Buddha requested Subhuti to inquire about Vimalakirti’s health on his behalf. As mentioned earlier, Subhuti and Mahakasyapa differ in their approach to making alms rounds. Subhuti is inclined to beg for alms at rich people’s house, since he reasons that wealthy people tend to indulge in sensory pleasures and do need the Dharma teachings on impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and selflessness. By giving them these teachings during begging, Subhuti can destroy their miserliness and arrogance.

Subhuti was born to a very rich family and when he was born, all the valuables and treasures in the house disappeared. His parents, frightened and puzzled, sought the counsel of a wise soothsayer who assured them that it actually was a good sign, and that Subhuti would become an extraordinary person in comprehending emptiness. Shortly after, all the valuables and treasures in the family reappeared, to the parents’ great relief. So his name in Sanskrit literally means “Auspicious Appearance”.

In a sutra called *The Sutra of Questions and Answers by Born-as-Female Bodhisattva*, there is a similar story of Subhuti about his receiving teachings on emptiness from a female bodhisattva. One day Subhuti dreamed a buddha who told him, “You should listen to the Dharma as you haven’t heard anything today.” Early in the morning Subhuti went to Buddha Shakyamuni’s place and told the Buddha about this dream. The Buddha said to him, “This is an auspicious

sign that today you will receive some rare teachings that are unprecedented for you.” Then as usual, he went to beg for food in the city, and there he encountered Born-as-Female Bodhisattva who gave him the precious Mahayana teaching on emptiness and equality.

Subhuti addressed the Buddha, “World-Honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? I remember once in the past, I entered into his home to beg. At the time Vimalakirti filled my bowl full of food and said to me,

“O Subhuti, if you are able to be universally same about eating, then the *dharmas* are also universally same; if the *dharmas* are universally same, you should also be universally same about eating. If you can practice begging like this, you may accept the food.”

Subhuti was reluctant to visit Vimalakirti as he remembered that once Vimalakirti challenged him when he went to his home to beg for alms. As we know, making alms rounds is regarded as an important practice in Buddhism. This beautiful tradition started at the Buddha’s time, and today monastics in Southeast Asia countries such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Cambodia, who follow the Theravada tradition, preserve this tradition intact in their daily practice. Every morning, they go to local villages for alms rounds, and lay people make offerings to them with respect. While begging for alms is not so obvious in Tibetan Buddhism and Han Buddhism, there are similar practices of the Sangha in regards to monastic life such as summer retreat.

When Subhuti went to Vimalakirti’s house to beg for alms, Vimalakirti took his bowl and filled it with excellent food. But without returning the bowl to Subhuti, Vimalakirti started to talk about the Dharma. Why did Vimalakirti act in this way? Some commentaries say that as a layperson, Vimalakirti paid due respect to a monk by first filling Subhuti’s bowl with the finest food. But if he had given the bowl back to Subhuti, Subhuti would have left promptly, which would have thwarted his plan to engage Subhuti in conversation. Thus he held onto the bowl.

Vimalakirti said: “Reverend Subhuti, if you can look on all foods as equal, you will look on all phenomena as equal; and if you can look on all phenomena as equal, you will also look on all foods as equal. If you beg for alms in this manner, then please take this food.” In short, he is reminding Subhuti of the equality pervading all things.

As mentioned, Subhuti had a habit of asking for alms from rich families and not from poor ones. His preference betrays a biased attitude toward people and food. Also in our daily life

there are individuals who are very picky about food and nothing can please their palates. Here Vimalakirti says that we should regard all food as equal.

The Buddha, for one, sees the sameness of all food. To him, even hay for horses and the amrita of devas are similar and of one taste. If one fathoms the equality of food, one realizes the equality of all things. As *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way* says, “Who sees one thing is said to see everything. The emptiness of one thing is the emptiness of everything.” The *Diamond Sutra* also teaches: “The incomparable enlightenment is of equality, free from low and high.”

Therefore, while seems like Vimalakirti was talking to Subhuti about his attitude to food, the hidden meaning is very profound. In the following teaching, Vimalakirti elaborated on other aspects as well—the equality between ordinary beings and the Buddha, the equality between liberation and bondage, the equality between false Dharma and authentic Dharma, and the equality between virtue and non-virtue.

“If, Subhuti, you refrain from eradicating licentiousness, anger, and stupidity, yet are not equipped with them;

Here talks about the equality between defilement and wisdom. Vimalakirti’s utterance of these words is akin to giving a direct “pointing out” instruction by a Vajra guru. In the Tantrayana tradition, this is a profound instruction which teaches one to realize the nature of defilement right at the moment any of desire, hatred, or stupidity arises. Once one recognizes its nature, then that’s it and there is indeed nothing to reject or adopt toward defilement. This nature remains unchanging no matter what kind of emotion arises. This is a state that words and languages are powerless to express. Whether one recognizes it or not, such is the true nature of all phenomena.

So at the onset, Vimalakirti tells Subhuti: “You refrain from eradicating desire, hatred, and ignorance, yet are not associated with them.” This goes against the common vehicle of Buddhist philosophy, which teaches us to eradicate desire, hatred, and ignorance first, only then wisdom dawns and liberation ensues. *The Precious Garland of the Middle Way* says:

Desire, aggression, and ignorance, as well as action induced by them

Lead to the accumulation of negative karma;

Being free from desire, aggression, and ignorance,

As well as their actions, lead to positive karma.

However, here Vimalakirti deviates from the basic teaching, saying that there is no need to abolish desire, aggression, and ignorance. If this is the case, does it mean one should be associated with afflictions? Absolutely not. Then, what exactly is he talking about? If one neither keeps afflictions nor gets rid of them, what option is left there? Actually, the nature of afflictions is as it is: free of cessation and abiding, free of adoption and refusal.

According to Tantrayana and the ultimate teaching of Mahayana, the nature of affliction is none other than wisdom, as stated in the scripture: “Defilements are Bodhi.” The *Platform Sutra* says: “With a preceding moment of deluded thought, one is an ordinary person; but with a succeeding moment of enlightened thought, one is a buddha. To be attached to one’s sensory object in a preceding moment is defilement, but to transcend the object in a succeeding moment is bodhi.” That is, clinging to an object in a previous moment is defilement, and transcending this clinging in the next moment is enlightenment. The difference hinges merely on a single thought, and the recognition of the nature of defilement brings forth Bodhi. Defilements are neither innate to us, nor must they be eradicated. This viewpoint is expounded extensively in the Tantrayana teaching.

There is a story in *The Miscellaneous Metaphors Sutra* that fits our present narration: A long time ago, a bodhisattva named Roots of Joy often expounded the profound teachings of ultimate truth such as that desire, aggression, and ignorance are none other than the Dharma path and nirvana, and that everything is equal. Whereas another ascetic monk, a previous incarnate of Bodhisattva Manjushri, was more inclined to the doctrines of causality and impurity, and as an ordinary being at that time, he found the teachings of Bodhisattva Root of Joy hard to swallow.

One day, the ascetic monk intentionally went to visit one of the bodhisattva’s students, and expounded to him the teaching of impurity. In turn, the student explained the true reality of all phenomena, and composed a song of seventy verses that praises the ultimate truth transcending desire, hatred, and ignorance. When he chanted the verses one after the other, the ascetic monk generated aversion again and again, which amounted to seventy times by the end of the chanting. As retribution to his perverse thought, the ascetic monk immediately fell into the hell and experienced tremendous suffering for countless eons.

When having finally exhausted his negative karma, he realized his previous fault and focused on the study of the ultimate truth and eventually became the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Manjushri. Indeed, his merit of having heard the teaching on ultimate truth in that life as an ordinary being had an inconceivable effect on his enlightenment.

The *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* says:

Path, lust, anger, and ignorance

Are fundamentally one essence;

If terrified by hearing such a teaching,

One has but a long way to tread on the Buddhist path.

Lust, anger, and ignorance are fundamentally of one essence with the Dharma path. This is a very sublime teaching. Upon hearing this proclamation, or that there is no need to abandon defilements, if people are terrified, it only shows that they have strayed far from the Dharma path. Many Buddhists have long subscribed to the notion of “doing no evil whatsoever, and practice virtue perfectly” and endeavored in eliminating mental poisons of desire and so forth. When they hear an otherwise profound tantric view, they may disparage it and generate wrong views. Actually, it is unnecessary to feel shocked, because all phenomena never stray from the true reality of emptiness and that is the great equalness of single taste.

if you do not destroy the body, yet accord with the single characteristic; if you do not extinguish stupidity and affection, yet generate wisdom and emancipation;

Here “destroy the body” means to destroy the wrong view on the transitory collection, based on which there is the belief in “I” and “mine”. In the normal training of bodhisattva path, the belief in the transitory collection must be demolished prior to realizing selflessness. Bodhisattvas on the eighth bhumi and above can fully realize the emptiness of self and phenomena without any habitual residue, so they can accord with the single characteristic, which is the sameness of emptiness and phenomena. However, Vimalakirti says: “Without eliminating the fixation on the transitory collection, you can reach the state of selflessness.” This view is so aloof that not every Buddhist can accept it.

In Buddhist training, ignorance and craving are earmarked as impediments that must be overcome for attaining enlightenment and liberation. But Vimalakirti states that without getting rid of ignorance or clinging to five aggregates, one can attain straightforwardly sublime

qualities such as the three types of clairvoyance and eight liberations. This claim seems unimaginable and unacceptable for the Sutrayana adherents. But, in it there are pith instructions pointing out the nature of mind, which are taught explicitly in tantric treatises such as *The Treasury of Dharmadhatu* and *The Treasury of the Natural State* among the *Seven Treasures* of the Omniscient Longchenpa.

Actually, what Vimalakirti imparted to Subhuti is very profound. The expounder may fail to explain this sutra correctly if lacking a fundamental training in Tantrayana, and the listeners will be at a loss to understand, let alone know how to go about practicing. Khenpo has actually looked up some contemporary commentaries of this sutra and found that this part was often skipped over with scant explanations. On the other hand, Khenpo himself feels quite at home in expounding this sutra from the point of view of Tantrayana. He believes that the current study of the *Vimalakirti Sutra* will afford both the teacher and students a clear comprehension on the inseparability of purity and equality, which is the core view of Tantrayana.

if you use the characteristics of the five transgressions to attain emancipation, without either emancipation or bondage; if you do not perceive the four noble truths, yet do not fail to perceive the truths;

Here “five transgressions” means the five heinous crimes. Generally speaking, committing the five heinous crimes, i.e., killing one’s father, killing one’s mother, killing an arhat, shedding the blood of a Buddha, creating discord within the Sangha, would definitely obviate one from attaining enlightenment. However, Vimalakirti says that such deadly sinful actions do not bar one from attaining liberation.

A similar view is also declared in the *Twelve Kinds of Vajra Laughter* and other tantric teachings, such as there is not the slightest difference between an individual who has committed the five heinous crimes and one who engages constantly in offering the buddhas of the three times, as spoken by Buddha Samantabhadra. This sounds very appalling and is difficult for us to reckon with. One might wonder: “How come a person having committed the five heinous crimes can attain enlightenment nonetheless? Is there no need for repentance whatsoever? That’s impossible!” Actually, the five deadly crimes are committed by a deluded and confused mind. When its real nature is recognized, the so-called heinous crimes are dissipated at the same moment. In this way, one can attain liberation on the spot.

In sutras, it is taught that only when all afflictive obscurations and cognition obscurations are eliminated will liberation be attained. The *Uttaratantra Shastra* says that habitual patterns that involve the three spheres are the cognitive obscurations, and discursive thoughts, such as miserliness, are afflictive obscurations. These two obscurations are bondages that must be cast off for liberation to occur. However, in the ultimate state of reality, there is neither liberation nor bondage; thus liberation and bondage are equally the same.

When arriving at the sacred cave Yanglesho in Nepal, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche spontaneously sang a vajra song, in which a line says: “Golden leash or rope leash, they bind all the same.” Therefore, fixation on attaining liberation is a leash as well.

On the conventional level, the Four Noble Truths—the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering—can be designated. Yet, in the ultimate sense there is nothing to perceive, as Vimalakirti declares here. To perceive nothing in the ultimate nature is the most sublime perception. This is what “not perceiving the Four Noble Truths” means. Then does it mean that “not perceiving the truth” is right? That’s not the case either. Perceiving the Four Noble Truths is incorrect, because there is nothing to perceive; whereas perceiving the mere emptiness of the Four Noble Truths is also untenable.

neither attaining the results [of becoming a stream-enterer, and so on,] nor not attaining the results; neither being an ordinary [unenlightened] person nor transcending the state of ordinary person; neither being a sage nor not being a sage; accomplishing all the *dharmas* yet transcending the characteristics of the *dharmas*—then you can accept this food.

Vimalakirti set forth more conditions for Subhuti to receive the food. One should not hold the concept of attaining or not attaining the results. Attaining the results may refer to those enlightened shravakas who attained different levels of fruition, such as Once-Returner, Non-Returner, or Arhat. Not attaining the results may refer to ordinary beings who do not possess any transcendent quality. Actually, both reaching fruition and not reaching fruition are merely labels reified by concepts. In ultimate truth, both “attaining” and “not attaining” fall into extremes.

Similarly, the labels such as “ordinary beings” or “not ordinary beings” are extremes as well. Do “ordinary beings” represent the true reality? No. If ordinary beings have no intrinsic

existence, then, is the mere emptiness of removing oneself from the ways of an ordinary being the ultimate truth? The answer is no again.

Further, do the sages like Manjushri and Samantabhadra truly exist? No. Then, how about those non-sages like us ordinary people? The answer is no as well. Sage and non-sage, ordinary person and non-ordinary person, are just dualistic fabrications of the conceptual mind. As the *King of Samadhi Sutra* says,

*Existence and nonexistence are two extremes,
Purity and impurity are two extremes as well.
Thus, having relinquished all dualistic extremes,
The wise do not dwell in the middle either.*

Vimalakirti also contests if Subhuti can accomplish all phenomena yet transcending the characteristics of all phenomena. According to the Mahayana teaching, although myriad phenomena appear in the world, their appearance is illusory, like dreams; and in true reality, all phenomena are free of any characteristic. The *Diamond Sutra* says: “Wheresoever are material characteristics there is delusion; but whosoever perceives that all characteristics are in fact no-characteristics, perceives the Tathagata.” When one sees that all forms are illusive and unreal, then one will begin to perceive the immutable suchness. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* says:

*Realizing the deep truth of Dependent Arising,
And entering into the Realm of Absolute Reality,
One sees all the compounded things
As illusory as reflections in the mirror.*

When we have penetrated the principle of dependent arising, we come to understand that in the absolute realm of reality, even as all kinds of phenomena arise, none of them has ever existed in their own right, be it external appearances to be perceived or six consciousnesses that can perceive.

Vimalakirti said to Subhuti: “If you understand these principles, you can take this bowl of food.” Upon hearing Vimalakirti’s teachings that deviate so much from what he has held, Subhuti must have been panicky, doubtful, and worried. Probably he cannot thoroughly comprehend what Vimalakirti is talking about. Indeed, the above teachings are easier to understand as they are mainly about the equality of all phenomena. The teachings below are

even more difficult to digest. Maybe because Subhuti is excellent in comprehending emptiness, when compared to Kashyapa, Vimalakirti gave him more profound teaching regarding the ultimate truth. As we can see, Vimalakirti would give different teachings to different people according to their capacities and preferences. This is the proper way of expounding the Dharma.

“Subhuti, you should only accept this food if you can neither see the Buddha nor hear the Dharma, nor the six teachers of heterodox paths¹—Purana Kasyapa, Maskarin Gosaliputra, Sam jayin Vairatiputra, Ajita Kesakam bala, Kakuda Katyayana, and Nirgrantha Jatiputra, who were your teachers, following whom you left home, [so that] at the defeat of those teachers you were also defeated—then you can accept this food.

Vimalakirti went on more outrageously: “Reverent Subhuti, from now on, if you can neither see the Buddha nor hear the Dharma, nor serve the Sangha, but rely on the six teachers of heterodox paths, if you are willing to take the six heretical teachers as your mentors, leave home because of them, and follow them to fall into the same errors they fall into, then you can take away the food and eat it.” How confused and overwhelmed Subhuti must have been! As a devout Buddhist and the Buddha’s foremost student in comprehending emptiness, how is it possible for Subhuti to forsake the Three Jewels and run away with heterodox teachers? What would you do if you were in his shoes?

The six heterodox teachers were the leaders of India’s six main philosophical schools at the time of the Buddha. Out of jealousy, they challenged the Buddha to a contest of miraculous powers. The Buddha then performed numerous miracles, overpowering all of them. The month that the Buddha subjugated the heretics is designated as the month of miracles, and stupas have been erected at various sites to commemorate the event.

The six heterodox teachers are: Purana Kasyapa, Maskarin Gosaliputra, Samjayin Vairatiputra, Ajita Kesakambala, Kakuda Katyayana, and Nirgrantha Jnatiputra. Khenpo describes them briefly below:

¹ The translation of this sentence is incorrect. It should be **“but rely on the six teachers of heterodox paths...”**

1. Purana Kasyapa: Promotes an only absence of existence. Deems everything such as filial piety is nonexistent.
2. Maskarin Gosali Putra: Denies the law of causality, believing sentient beings' suffering and happiness arise for no reason. Today some people have the same attitude. When a mishap befalls them, instead of regarding it as the effect of action committed in their present or precious lifetimes, they stubbornly complain: "I've done so many good deeds. Why do I end up like this? Why I am so unlucky?" This shows they have no understanding of cause and effect, nor do they believe in reincarnation.
3. Samjayin Vairati Putra: Believes sentient beings will naturally attain liberation when they have exhausted their samsaric existence. In other words, no spiritual practice is needed in order to attain liberation.
4. Ajita Kesakambala: Regards wrong reasons as right reasons. For example, believing obscurations can be purified by bathing in the Ganges River or setting one's body on fire.
5. Kakuda Katyayana: Follows the worldly ways passively, without their own exclusive view. What worldly people recognize as existent, they agree; what worldly people recognize as nonexistent, they agree as well.
6. Nirgrantha Jnati Putra: Is similar to the Jainism today, undertaking the practice of total nudity as a way to dispel obstacles. Acts according to the law of causality to some extent; for instance, they forbid killing living beings and eating meat; they tie small bells on their feet while walking to drive away small insects.

Vimalakirti urges Subhuti: "If you go ahead to rely on these teachers, leave home and follow their doctrines. If they walk to a precipice and fall, so will you likewise. If you have this kind of guts and courage, you may take this bowl of food." Poor Subhuti! Vimalakirti is picking on him, confronting him about the Buddhist view, and demolishing the doctrines he has always held dear. Yet that's not all, more appalling statements follow.

"If, Subhuti, you can enter into the heterodox views and not reach the other shore; abide in the eight difficulties and not attain the absence of difficulty; identify with the afflictions and transcend the pure *dharma*s; attain the *samadhi* of noncontention; if all sentient

beings generate this concentration²; if the donors do not name you their field of blessings; if those making offerings to you fall into the three evil destinations;

The heterodox views pertain to the sixty-four erroneous ones of nihilism, eternalism, and others. Vimalakirti is suggesting Subhuti to forget about reaching the other shore of Prajnaparamita and ignore realizing emptiness.

The eight difficulties are conditions that are devoid of the leisure to practice and study the Dharma. They are: rebirth as hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, long-lived gods; being born in border countries where the Dharma is unheard of; having wrong views; being born in dark kalpa when buddhas don't appear; being born with incomplete faculties such as being mute. It sounds like Vimalakirti is cursing Subhuti that he'll abide in the eight difficulties never have the opportunity to encounter the Buddhadharma, which is serious!

“Transcend the pure *dharma*s” means removing oneself from a state of purity. That is, he can indulge in desire, aversion, and ignorance, enjoy the company of the perverted and not bother seeking the way of purification.

The samadhi of noncontention means a stainless samadhi that is free from any defilement and discord. Vimalakirti challenged Subhuti to attain such samadhi of nondisputation and meanwhile allowing all living beings to attain the same degree of Samadhi. That is, do not deem himself extraordinary among all living beings.

Vimalakirti also claimed that those who made offering to Subhuti would not call him as their field of blessings and they would fall into the three lower realms. Generally speaking, the great monks with a high level of realization such as Subhuti can be called the field of blessings, meaning that if someone makes offerings to them, then this person will receive blessings and accumulate merit. Indeed, through these seemingly contradictory teachings Vimalakirti was encouraging Subhuti to realize the ultimate truth, in which the wrong views of the heterodox teachers have no difference with the right view taught by the Buddha, all the good things have

² The translation of this sentence is incorrect. It should be “**if attain the *samadhi* of noncontention, all sentient beings attain the same degree of concentration; ...**”

no difference from the bad things, and virtues and non-virtues share the same nature of emptiness.

if you join hands with the host of Maras and make them your coworkers; if you do not differentiate yourself from the host of Maras and the sensory troubles;

“The sensory troubles” means the dusts of defilements. In Buddhism, Mara is the personification of evil, death, aggregates, and all negative emotions. To us, Mara is the very enemy of liberation, and we must stay away from it as much as possible. But Vimalakirti instructed Subhuti to keep Mara as a close companion and to make friends with defiled emotions. This advice, according to Khenpo, is actually Vimalakirti’s “gift” to us. That is, we need not take a hostile and defensive stance against our perceived enemies, imaging them the like of Maras. But rather, we should cultivate the attitude of equality towards everything and everybody. Khenpo asks us to think over Vimalakirti’s words and train accordingly to gain proficiency. As a result, our constant neuroses of imagining things or nitpicking others will lessen; our prejudices will be pacified and we come to see the equality in all things. Should we encounter difficult situations, we can apply healthy ways to cope with them.

In absolute reality, obstacles and Maras have no intrinsic existence, and the Buddha and Mara are actually equal in nature, as taught in Dzogchen doctrines and in the biographies of great masters such as Jetsun Milarepa. In conventional reality, of course, Buddha and Mara appear to be at opposite poles. Mara is known to be the lord of the highest heaven in the desire realm, the one enjoying the emanations of others. Mara is unfazed by living beings who practice the concentrations of the form or formless realm, or who achieve great accomplishment in worldly life, as he deems them as his subjects. However, he would be fearful and worrying when encountering buddhas and bodhisattvas, because they have transcended samsaric existence and are forever beyond his reach.

When Vimalakirti said “join hands with the host of Maras”, he was referring to a state of the ultimate reality. For a practitioner who has realized the indivisibility of equality and purity, there is no difference among Maras, devas, or buddhas, and hence has no qualms about associating with any of them. The nature of Maras and defiled emotions is precisely one’s own natural being. Therefore, do not differentiate oneself from the host of Maras and the dusts of defilements.

if you bear resentment toward all sentient beings; if you revile the Buddha, denigrate the Dharma, and do not enter the Sangha; and if you never attain extinction—if you are like this then you can accept the food.'

The “resentment” means an intention to kill. This is an outlandish statement. In Buddhist precepts, harming living beings, even to the extent of hurting a single hair, is forbidden, let alone taking their lives. Now Vimalakirti utters a totally opposite view. And then he goes on with his persuasion: “Subhuti, go ahead and slander the Buddha, ruin the Dharma, and alienate the Sangha. Spend time with those overtaken by mistaken views, and never bother to attain the extinction of nirvana. If you are like this then you can take the food.”

Vimalakirti’s proposition is way beyond common sense, which definitely will befuddle the average person and menace the beliefs of ordinary practitioners. Normally, slandering the Buddha and committing the five heinous crimes are the gravest felonies. Here, however, we must appreciate that Vimalakirti is presenting a view at the highest level of Tantrayana. Those who have been initiated in this discipline should have no problem comprehending the meaning. Even if one has not acquired such a view, reading some stories of the Chan School may provide some glimpses. Here are two examples:

When it was the dead of winter, Chan master Danxia was visiting a temple. At night it got so cold that he took a wooden Buddha statue from the hall, burned it, and warmed himself by the blaze. When questioned, the Master replied, “I am cremating it, in hope to find some holy relics.”

Master Mazu Daoyi used to spit on buddha statues. Many people balked at his outrageous behavior and pleaded him not to do so. He responded nonchalantly, “In each direction, everywhere in the universe, even in the tiniest particle there reside innumerable buddhas. Tell me where in the world a buddha is not present? Just where could I spit?” There are many such stories for us to consider.

In the 15th century, there was a Tibetan yogi named Drukpa Kunleg who, like the notorious “Monk Ji Gong” in Han Buddhism, was a “Divine Madman” noted for his bizarre and unorthodox ways of teaching Buddhism. One day he met an old lady who was carrying a painted scroll. “Where are you going?” Drukpa Kunleg asked her. “A monastery is holding a great puja and conferring blessings. I am going there to have my sacred tangka consecrated and blessed,” replied the old woman. The yogi said: “I suppose I can do that for you. Show me your

thangka.” The women unrolled it; then, out of the blue, the yogi started to urinate over the scroll, totally ruined the beautiful thangka. The woman was devastated beyond words. When she reached the monastery, she complained about the deplorable behavior of the madman. The monks knew the yogi must be Drukpa Kunleg and said to the old woman, “Your thangka has already been blessed in the best possible way by a great siddha so there’s no need to ask for our blessing.” They opened the thangka and saw that the once urine-splashed painting was without any blemish; instead it was sparkling with inlaid gold dust and looked extraordinarily magnificent.

Worldly people fixate on defilements as real by itself, and label filth and disorder as bad. But if one can behold them with the wisdom that realizes emptiness, all appearance is understood as the dynamic display of emptiness, and no trace of grim and sullied things will be perceived.

“When I heard these words, World-honored One, I was bewildered and did not understand what he had said. I did not know how to answer, so I put down the bowl and tried to leave his house. Vimalakirti then said,

“O Subhuti, do not be afraid to take your bowl. What is the meaning of this? If a [phantasmagorical] person whom the Tathagata has created through the transformation [of conjury] is criticized for this, should he be afraid?” I said, ‘No.’ Vimalakirti said, ‘All the *dharmas* have the characteristic of being like phantasmagorical transformations. You should not have any fear now.

Subhuti told the Buddha that when he heard these words of Vimalakirti, he was dumbfounded. In the Tibetan and Xuanzang’s version it states, “Just like being surrounded by heavy darkness, I totally lost direction.” Thereupon, this learned monk, renowned for his great understanding of emptiness, was at his wit’s end and speechless; he had no choice but put down the bowl, wanting to hurry away.

Then Vimalakirti called out after him: “O Subhuti, do not be afraid to take it with you. If an illusory person created by the Buddha were to criticize you, would you be scared still?” Here is Vimalakirti’s explanation: If a phantom being spoke nasty things to someone, this person would not be afraid, because he knows it is an illusory phenomenon. In fact, the person himself is also an illusion and what happened between Subhuti and Vimalakirti was unreal as well. All phenomena are magic displays, like a dream or make-believe. Thus, there is no need to be scared.

Today many people lack a sense of security. They live in fear and anxiety that are likely caused by environmental factors or the pressure of daily life. Khenpo believes that as long as one has become familiar with emptiness through the study of the Middle Way philosophy, one should be immune from these emotional disturbances.

We should not become too fixated and attached to life and worldly phenomena. Just give it our best shot when undertaking any task, knowing it is but illusory. Even if our project falls through, it's fine. Avoid clinging to life as if everything is solid and real. Indeed, our life is just like kids playing at the beach; they build sand castles, ever so intently and earnestly, but eventually all this hard work will end up with nothing when the tide rises and the wind increases. If we hold firmly to the games of life, we will just waste our energy and undergo suffering. All things in the world are unreliable and will change unpredictably. Why be so afraid and worried?

Why? All verbal explanations do not transcend this characteristic. The wise are not attached to letters, and therefore they have no fear. Why? The nature of letters transcends [their characteristics]; there are no letters. This is emancipation, and the characteristic of emancipation is the *dharma*s.'

All verbal explanations do not transcend the characteristic of being illusory, like phantoms. The wise are not attached to words, thus they have no fear upon hearing them. The *Lankavatara Sutra* says: "Such is an ignorant person, who mistakes the pointing finger as the moon; so too are those who get attached to names and words, they cannot understand my reality of truth." When fingers are used to point out the direction of the moon, dim-witted people may end up staring at the finger, instead of looking at the moon. In the same vein, those who fuss about syntax and phraseology are stuck in the facade of words, while ignoring the true meaning behind it. This is an important reason that truth is often revealed without words in the training of Great Perfection or Chan.

Indeed, speaking from the ultimate sense, words and pronouncements can also be said to be Mara's talk. In the past, when Chan Masters Weishan and Yangshan were engaging in "cue" — the topic of meditative inquiry, Weishan asked: "Among the forty chapters of the *Nirvana Sutra*, which part was the Buddha's words and what part the Mara's?" Yangshan answered: "All are Mara's."

To ordinary Buddhists, this kind of talk sounds irrational. But the ultimate truth transcends words and language. According to the sutras of most definitive meaning, the Buddha actually

has not uttered a single word in the time from his attaining enlightenment to his entering into parinirvana. For most people, however, this mode of the ultimate reality is hard to grapple with. They feel more comfortable to rely on words and characters, which, in fact, is not the absolute approach. Words and speech have no independent nature of their own and, transcending the characteristics of words and speech is liberation. The person who achieves such liberation also realizes the nature of all things, as all things in the phenomenal world bear this genuine mark of liberation.

“When Vimalakirti explained this Dharma, two hundred gods attained purification of their Dharma eyes. Therefore I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

In Xuanzang’s version, it is 20,000 gods who attained purification of their Dharma eyes. It also states that there are five hundred more gods who attained the patient acceptance of non-arising dharmas, and this same information can be found in the Tibetan and Japanese versions as well.

It is obvious that many people attained liberation upon hearing Vimalakirti’s teaching. In fact, the exact same theme has been expounded in the tantric teaching—that the nature of craving, aversion, delusion, afflictions, and mistaken views is none other than wisdom; that the heterodox masters are not different from the Buddha; that committing the five heinous crimes is one and the same as making offerings to buddhas of three times, etc. Such revelations are commonly found among ultimate pith instructions of Tantrayana. Obviously, those who lack training in this aspect will be confused by these teachings.

In fact, the tenets of sutras and tantras are completely consistent with each other in absolute sense. In the tantric tradition, it is required that the profound teachings such as “defilement is wisdom” can only be transmitted to worthy and suitable recipients who have completed the outer and inner preliminary practices and have received ripening empowerments. The *Vimalakirti Sutra*, however, although expounding the profound and ultimate truth in a direct manner, can be taught to everyone without any strict requirement. It is a very rare text of sutrayana that embraces smoothly the ultimate teachings of both sutras and tantras. It is a unique scripture endowed with great power of blessing from the Buddha and Vimalakirti themselves. That is why Khenpo feels so delighted that he has this opportunity to teach this sutra to such a large audience. For both Mahayana or Vajrayana followers, it is always crucial to thoroughly understand the ultimate truth of all things, thus one will have great wisdom and

powerful ability to face any difficulty or obstacle in one's life. Khenpo believes that many audiences will generate unwavering conviction on the ultimate view of emptiness and equality after studying this sutra.

Lecture 17

A Few More Words about Subhuti's Story

In the previous text, we have learnt that Vimalakirti gave Subhuti many teachings, such as one can attain liberation while committing the five transgressions; one should praise and take refuge in the six teachers of heterodox paths while destroying and slandering the Three Jewels; one should be committed to slaughtering all beings, and so on. These statements could shock those who have never systematically studied the Buddhist philosophy, or those who have just learnt some basic Sutrayana teachings but have no exposure to any tantric teachings or even the transitional teaching between Sutrayana and Tantrayana, such as the teaching on buddha nature expounded during the third turning of the Dharma wheel.

As we know, Buddha Shakyamuni taught sentient beings the gradual paths to enlightenment in accordance with their capacities, and opened the 84,000 Dharma doors. All the Sutrayana teachings of the Tripitaka and Twelve Divisions are included in the three turnings of the Dharma wheel. The first turning is mainly about the Four Dharma Seals, namely all that is conditioned is impermanent, all that is tainted is suffering, all phenomena are empty and devoid of self, and nirvana is peace. Before the Buddha entered parinirvana, he preached the *Nirvana Sutra* which illuminates the profound teachings of buddha nature that features by permanence, bliss, self and purity. This is characterized in the third turning of the Dharma wheel, which bears some similarities to the Tantrayana teaching.

Some Buddhists of today only have a good feeling about Buddhism and treat it as a hobby or a leisure belief, lacking a serious attitude towards the study of the Dharma. Whilst some others, despite their having taken refuge for a long time, understand only the Four Dharma Seals and some basic instructions of the Common Vehicle, and are unexposed to uncommon Mahayana teachings.

Such people could have difficulty in embracing Vimalakirti's abstruse teachings to Subhuti, or even feel frightened. Due to their ignorance of the profound thoughts of Sutrayana such as the instruction of Chan or the Vajrayana's pointing-out instruction, they would feel confused, "How can one attain liberation while committing the five heinous crimes of

immediate retribution? The refuge vows require that one should not rub shoulders with the heterodox, but now Vimalakirti claims to abandon the Three Jewels and to follow the heterodox paths! Isn't it a paradox?" They might develop the wrong views or even abandon the Dharma.

Regarding these situations, Khenpo did have some concerns before giving such profound teaching. The first was that people lacking systematical study would have difficulty in understanding these profound teachings, and the second was that people carrying biased or wrong views towards Mahayana teachings might cite the context in pieces and defame some Buddhist stories and teachings due to their poor understanding.

After mulling over, Khenpo chose to give the teaching without any hesitation because the ultimate truth of Buddhism should be taught to all those Buddhists with proper capacity. Among the large audience of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, many people barely knew about the ultimate true reality expounded in the Tantrayana, and had only received some basic teachings of the vehicle of the gods and humans. If Khenpo chose to avoid teaching the ultimate truth, these people might never have such opportunity to appreciate the Buddha's true intention. Therefore, despite the great challenges for both the teacher and the students, Khenpo was determined to illuminate what are supposed to be known in this sutra.

It is normal for some individuals not to accept the ultimate teachings, and back to the time of the Buddha, there were still many who were incapable of understanding the profound Dharma, and even worse, generated wrong views and thus fell into the hell. But even if they disparaged the Mahayana teachings, we don't need to hate or retaliate against them, because the truth will become clearer after being examined. When the wise is being denigrated, his wisdom, compassion and power will naturally be exhibited. Quoting from Mipham Rinpoche, "Obstacles may appear to be unfavorable yet turn out to be favorable conditions after all, and vice versa." Hence, truth can withstand any kinds of tests at any time, like real gold not fearing fire.

Therefore, Khenpo is confident of promoting the truth, and hopes everyone will earnestly study, contemplate and explore its profound meanings, and pursue the precious truth by using one's in-depth wisdom. This is the correct attitude that every Buddhist should adopt. This is essential.

The teachings Vimalakirti expounded for Subhuti are all about the ultimate truth. On the conventional level, committing the five heinous crimes, making offering to the Buddhas of the three times, denigrating the Three Jewels and praising the six teachers of heterodox paths, all these phenomena are obviously different and should be distinguished by adopting virtues and abandoning non-virtues. On the ultimate level, however, they are in great equality because their nature is none other than emptiness.

Some of you have studied Mipham Rinpoche's *Essence of Clear Light*, in which the great equality is elaborated in great detail. After studying this book, we should be able to fully comprehend the equality on the level of ultimate truth, i.e., existence and non-existence, good and bad, beauty and ugliness are all the same. There are many concepts and phenomena that seem to be contradictory with each other, but can be the same in nature, which is quite easy to be explained from the tantric or the ultimate Mahayana point of view.

Through a systematic in-depth study, many people will gradually gain real insight into the profoundness of the Dharma, not just talk eloquently. As the saying goes, "The person who drinks the water knows if it is cold or warm." By then, the view will not be altered or refuted by anyone no matter how hard they try. As beginners who have a shallow knowledge of the Dharma, if you can't accept these teachings for now, please don't slander or abandon the truth in haste. Instead you should contemplate in this way, "The wisdom of the Buddha and great masters of the past is unfathomable. Perhaps it is due to my scanty knowledge and strong conceptual thoughts that I cannot understand their teachings right now. So it is better for me not to abandon them, but to keep observing and exploring the truth so that I will gradually understand it." In this way, we will progressively comprehend the profound teachings of emptiness and equality. We will realize that the ultimate truth is beyond all conceptual elaborations, and all phenomena no matter good or bad, virtuous or non-virtuous are equal by nature, while on the conventional level they are illusory and dreamlike.

When Subhuti appeared to be frightened upon hearing the teachings of ultimate truth and was going to put down the bowl and escape, Vimalakirti told him, "O Subhuti, don't be afraid. If these teachings were told by a phantom person conjured up by the Buddha, would you be scared?" Then Vimalakirti gave him the instructions of perceiving everything as dreams and illusions.

The teaching of “all phenomena are free from the four extremes and eight conceptual elaborations in ultimate truth, while are like dreams and illusions in conventional truth” is repeatedly mentioned in many Mahayana sutras, such as *The Ornament of Clear Realization* and *Condensed Verses of Prajnaparamita*, as well as in many teachings of Mipham Rinpoche. We should understand that from all material phenomena up to the Buddha’s wisdom, everything is beyond the four extremes and eight conceptual elaborations, while they can appear like dreams and illusions on the conventional level. These are the teachings Vimalakirti gave to Subhuti, and also the view of the Prasangika school of Madhyamaka.

In ultimate truth, virtues and non-virtues are equally empty and beyond all kinds of extremes. The great equality of emptiness can be also called the indestructible bindu, the supreme ultimate truth, and so on. In conventional truth, the way that all phenomena appear before our five or six consciousnesses is like dreams and illusions. Before we are able to reach enlightenment, the world is just like this. Through a long-term study, we will understand these teachings.

In the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*, there are many conversations between Subhuti and the Buddha. Since Subhuti was excellent in comprehending emptiness, and could better accept the supreme Dharma than normal Shravakas, Vimalakirti skillfully explained the most profound and unfathomable teaching to him.

Khenpo heard that quite a few lay Buddhists and monastics couldn’t sleep well after the teaching as they had never heard such a profound view. The same situation happened many years ago. When His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche taught Rongzom Pandita’s *Introduction to the Way of the Great Vehicle*, which illustrates the ultimate truth such as the nonexistence of the Three Jewels and the nonexistence of virtue and non-virtue, a novice monk from Khenpo Sodargye’s hometown felt quite puzzled about the teaching. He was a Tibetan and kept a pure belief in Buddhism since childhood. After becoming a monk, he was determined to study hard and observe pure precepts. However, what he learnt right after he got ordained was the nonexistence of six paramitas and so on, which was too hard for him to accept.

Early one morning, he came to Khenpo and asked, “I couldn’t sleep and was thinking the

whole night about yesterday's teaching. I always believe that the merit of taking ordination is significant and have overcome all the difficulties to get ordained. But now I am told that everything is nonexistent. I'm so confused about what I am going to learn here." Khenpo comforted him by saying, "Don't worry, the teaching you received yesterday is quite profound. Although you can't understand it at present, you will gradually comprehend it as long as you persevere in the Dharma study."

This story shows why it is necessary to follow a systematic approach to study the Dharma. Before learning the tantric teaching, one needs to complete the preliminary practices and then study the philosophy of the Middle Way. It is quite essential to truly comprehend the empty nature of all phenomena through learning the Middle Way, and then we will be well prepared for the profound teachings of the primordial purity that are expounded in Dzogchen or Mahamudra.

Despite Khenpo's constant reminders of laying a solid foundation, many people are so anxious that they urge, "I don't have time to learn the Middle Way or finish the preliminary practices now. Could you give me a special permission to get enrolled in tantric studies directly? I have great faith in Tantrayana and I am well prepared!"

Although their intention is good and Tantrayana has no faults to be hidden, it is unrealistic to start with the tantric study immediately. Without a solid foundation laid by studying the Dharma systematically, one will barely understand many Dharma teachings, just like the students in junior or high school learning university courses, they would get lost and be bewildered due to the knowledge gap. The educational style of Buddhism is such a step-by-step process that we won't be able to endure profound teachings of Tantrayana without following this approach.

After finishing the four stories of Shariputra, the foremost ranked in wisdom, Maudgalyayana, the foremost ranked in miraculous power, Mahakasyapa, the foremost ranked in ascetic practice, and Subhuti, the foremost ranked in comprehending emptiness, now we will continue with the story of Purna Maitrayaniputra. As one of the ten great disciples of the Buddha, Purna was foremost in teaching the Dharma, and he had long enjoyed the reputation of recognizing different faculties of sentient beings. However, he had to admit defeat in the presence of Vimalakirti.

Purna's dialogue with Vimalakirti

The Buddha told Purna Maitraayaniputra, “You go inquire about Vimalakirti’s illness.”

“Purna” was his own name, means “full”, “Maitraayani” was his mother’s name, and “putra” means “son”. Since ancient India was a matriarchal society, people have this tradition of taking their mothers’ names as their family names, such as Maitraayaniputra, Shariputra, as well as the six teachers of heterodox paths.

It is said that once Purna’s father went to a river named *The Full River* to pray to the deity for a son. At that night, Purna’s mother dreamed that all vessels in their house were filled with various kinds of treasures. The fortuneteller told them that they would give birth to a meritorious child. Later, when Purna was born, various kinds of treasures filled their house. The opposite happened to the birth of Subhuti. When Subhuti was born, all fortune in his family disappeared without trace. So according to some commentaries, Purna’s name also means “fulfilling wishes”, since the deity fulfilled his father’s wish, or means “full of treasures”, as his birth fulfilled all vessels at home with precious treasures.

Purna was an incredible Arhat due to his ability to discriminate the faculties of different sentient beings and give proper teachings. Regardless of the dangers and difficulties, he would earnestly spread the Buddha’s teachings. One day, he asked the Buddha’s permission to go to teach in Sudana. The Buddha said, “It is an undeveloped place and the people are cruel and uncivilized, what if they scold you?”

Purna said, “Not a problem, I will regard them as nice people because they just scold me but not hit me with their fists.”

The Buddha asked him, “What if they hit you with their fists?”

“That doesn’t matter as long as they do not throw stones at me.”

“What if they throw stones at you?”

“That doesn’t matter as long as they do not attack me with sticks.”

“What if they attack you with sticks?”

“That doesn’t matter as long as they do not attack me with a knife.”

“What if they attack you with a knife?”

“That doesn’t matter as long as they do not kill me.”

“What if they kill you?”

“It does not matter. I’m weary of this body of blood and flesh. If they kill me, I can take the opportunity to enter into nirvana.”

Unlike some people who are used to imaging the worst scenario although things are not bad at all, Purna was not afraid of the dangerous situation because he knew the characteristics and intentions of different sentient beings, and he also had the courage to face the worst situation. Ordinary people may turn away from challenges and say, “I dare not go there. What if they hit me or kill me? What if I will die?” As Dharma practitioners, it is important for us to change our mindset and strengthen the power of mind along with our way of learning and practicing the Dharma.

It is mentioned in some sutras that Purna was also proficient in medicine and often treated people’s physical illness. As more and more people came to him for treatment, he took such opportunities to tell them that mental health was as important as physical health, and then skillfully taught them the supreme Dharma to thoroughly cure their mental problems.

Modern medicine also holds that over 200 illnesses of human are caused by mental problems. Mental disorders leads to physical disorders. For example, anger triggers liver diseases and greed causes diseases in lung and other organs. This view echoes the Buddhist reasoning that one must adjust his or her state of mind so as to keep the physical body healthy. People who can immerse their mind in the state of compassion, wisdom and altruism will not have many negative emotions. Consequently, their immune system will be improved and able to prevent the invasion of wind, cold, heat and dampness, etc.

In this regard, Khenpo thinks that Buddhism is more than a religion, because it also provides marvelous scientific approaches to deal with people’s mental problems. Although the modern world teems with mental counseling and yoga studios, it is a pity that few of them is successful in uprooting the very cause of people’s mental disorders. If we can apply

the Buddhist philosophy of compassion and wisdom to our daily life, we will see the dramatic changes in life. Because our heart is adjusted to the optimum state by disengaging the mind bondage, it will exhibit the indestructible power. With such a strong and sincere mind, we will be able to deal with various problems in our life with ease.

Purna addressed the Buddha, “World-honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? I remember once in the past, when I was beneath a tree in the forest explaining the Dharma to novice bhiksus. At the time Vimalakirti came and said to me,

In sutras, “**beneath a tree**” is a frequently appeared scenario. This indicates that spiritual practices do need a nice natural environment. Khenpo suggests us to be environmentally conscious and take more actions to protect and to improve the external environment, such as planting more trees and flowers. The progress of environmental protection will contribute to the good health of people. Indeed, there is a close connection between the Buddha’s life and trees. He was born under an ashoka tree in Lumbini, practiced austerities in the grove near the Niranjana River, attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree at Bodhgaya, and gave his first teaching in the grove of Deer Park. In addition, the holy places such as the Vulture Peak Mountain and Vaisali where the Buddha used to give Dharma teachings were all shaded by nice trees. Finally, the Buddha entered parinirvana beneath the large sala trees at Kushinagar.

When Purna was teaching Dharma to the novice Bhikshus, Vimalakirti appeared unexpectedly. Seems like he would appear anytime and anywhere to give some proper teachings. Actually, being a Dharma teacher or tutor, one should be more considerate in guiding students in all aspects of cultivation, including wisdom, compassion, personality and the observation of precepts, etc. Although we can’t fully tell the capacity and practice of each student like Vimalakirti, we can still gather adequate information through careful observation, and this is quite necessary in order to give them proper advice.

Also, it is not necessarily true that only monastics can be Dharma teachers. Back in early 2000 when Khenpo taught *The Sword of Wisdom for Thoroughly Ascertaining Reality*, he proposed the idea of training lay practitioners to become Dharma teachers. Many people were quite surprised then and wondered how it was possible. In fact, Vimalakirti is an ideal

lay Dharma teacher and many monastics are outshined by him. So it is Khenpo's wish to develop a group of lay Dharma teachers similar to Vimalakirti!

“O Purna, you should only explain the Dharma after first entering into concentration and contemplating the minds of these people—do not put defiled food in a jeweled vessel. You should understand what these bhiksus are thinking—do not put lapis lazuli together with crystal.

When Purna was explaining the Dharma to novice Bhikshus, Vimalakirti came without being invited and told Purna respectfully, “Venerable Purna, you should first enter samadhi and observe their mind before explaining the Dharma to them. Don't put the defiled food in a jeweled vessel!” These are the general comments of Vimalakirti. The main idea is that a Dharma teacher should give teaching according to listeners' different capacities.

Purna was well known for his skillful teaching. However, if he were to be compared with Vimalakirti, he was not able to thoroughly know the capacities of sentient beings through the wisdom of concentration. Therefore, Vimalakirti reminded him, “You should first observe people's mind, including their motivation and characteristics. For people having a mind of Mahayana, you should give them the Mahayana teachings; for those having a mind of Hinayana, you should give them the Hinayana teachings accordingly. If you give Mahayana practitioners the Hinayana teachings for their own liberation, you will ruin them just like putting the defiled food in the jeweled vessels.”

Vimalakirti continued to say, “You should understand the inclination of these Bhikshus, see whether they prefer Mahayana or Hinayana. Never mistake the precious lapis lazuli for crystal.” In Buddhism Lapis lazuli is one of the seven jewels and very precious. Although crystal is expensive nowadays, by contrast it is not as precious as lapis lazuli. In the Tibetan version, it says, “You should not take lapis lazuli as fake jewel.”

Sentient beings have different inclinations. Some of them like Mahayana, some like Hinayana, some like the vehicle of the gods and humans and while others can't even accept the vehicle of the gods and humans. The metaphor of jewels is used to show their different dispositions. If the jewel-like motivation of Mahayana is mixed up with the selfish attitude

of Hinayana or the vehicle of the gods and humans, it is just like lapis lazuli being taken as the ordinary crystal, which is totally wrong.

“You are unable to understand the fundamental sources of sentient beings—do not inspire them with the Hinayana Dharma.

Vimalakirti had talked about people’s mind and inclination, and here he talked about people’s fundamental sources, or faculties. Sentient beings have different faculties, some are sharp, some are dull, some are suited for Hinayana and some for Mahayana. Without clearly knowing their faculties, it is unreasonable to ask everyone to follow Shrivakayana and make aspirations in the Hinayana way.

It looks like that Purna was teaching a group of novice Bhikshus who were on the threshold of their Dharma practice. But in fact, these Bhikshus were extraordinary as they had already planted virtuous seeds in front of 500 buddhas in the past. It was just that they had forgotten about their previous lives. Purna was not aware of this fact, but Vimalakirti knew it clearly.

Like Purna, some Dharma teachers and tutors also give teachings according to their own preferences. For example, as some teachers prefer the practice of Bodhichitta, so they talk about it every day; some teachers are weary of the worldly life, so they keep talking about the practice of renunciation all day long; some teachers find their practices grounded in the view of the non-dualistic nature of equality and purity are quite rewarding, so they often teach about the pure perception. As we know, renunciation, bodhichitta and pure perception are the practices of the three different yantras, so Dharma teachers should better pay attention to their listeners’ capacities and preference before giving teaching. Meanwhile, no matter what kind of teaching will be given, the teacher must follow the traditional way of lineage masters to explain the Dharma, instead of adding any comment based on one’s own opinion. In order to do so, one must delve into sutras and shastras to fully understand the Buddha’s teaching.

Here, he mainly talks about the differences between Hinayana and Mahayana. For those with the capacity of Mahayana, one should not inspire them with the Hinayana motivation, in which case their virtuous roots of Mahayana will be destroyed. In the *Great Dharma Torch Dharani Sutra*, it says,

*Not knowing the capacity of beings,
The Dharma teacher may teach wrongly,
Leading beings further away from gaining benefits,
And even accelerating their developing of wrong views.*

If the teacher doesn't know the capacity of beings and arrogantly gives them improper teachings, he or she will make those beings gain no benefit, and even worse, develop more wrong views. Therefore, we need to be cautious and responsible in teaching or tutoring others. It might not be a big fault if we say something wrong by accident, however, a myriad of faults will be born of intentionally going against the Dharma.

Since we don't have the ability to read the minds of all different beings, it is hard to know their faculties. As such, we can teach in various methods the philosophies or instructions commonly accepted and liked by people. *The Buddha Speaks of Manjushri's Manifesting Dharma Treasures Sutra* states that,

*Having cultivated different actions,
Different beings have different capacities.
Thus different teachings are given accordingly
To lead them onto the path of liberation.*

Considering the different characters and dispositions of beings, different teachings are given according to their own capacities in order to lead them onto the path. On some occasions we can also talk about what the audience cares about. Khenpo said that he knows well the characteristics of the Dharma friends at Larung Gar, so he sometimes will tell jokes on purpose during teaching. But not everyone will laugh, because different people have different hobbies and preferences. For example, a movie can make the easterners laugh but not the westerners. Some people think it's funny, some might not, and some even feel it's ridiculous. So it is necessary to know the capacities of sentient beings.

Other and self are without flaw³, so do not harm them. If someone wants to travel the great path (i.e., practice the Mahayana), do not show them a small pathway. The ocean cannot be contained within the hoofprint of an ox; The radiance of the sun cannot be

³ This sentence should be translated as **Other are without wounds**

equaled by that of a firefly.

If one is healthy, then do not do anything to harm him or her. This metaphor means that if a person already has the faculty of Mahayana, then his faculty should not be destroyed by giving him the Hinayana teaching. Similarly, those who are not ready to receive the Vajrayana teaching can be also hurt upon hearing it. So we can understand why in the *Lotus Sutra*, 500 people left the Dharma assembly right away when hearing the Buddha's teaching on the ultimate truth. Although people look similar from the outside, their mind set varies a lot as some are strong while others are fragile, some are broad and soft while some are narrow and rigid.

If a person wants to travel the great path, it is not good to show them a narrow path. Likewise, those who long for the great Mahayana path will never be satisfied with the Hinayana path which only teaches the selflessness of the individual. Also, it is not reasonable to put the water of the entire ocean into a small hoofprint of an ox. *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* says,

*The path of those Shravakas is narrow and inferior,
As negligible as the footprint of the cattle.
So it cannot lead beings
To eliminate all their mental afflictions.*

Because their path is narrow and inferior, the realization of Shravakas is as negligible as the water contained in the footprint of a cattle, so they are unable to eradicate all kinds of mental afflictions. In the Tibetan version, there is another metaphor which says, do not try to put Mount Sumeru into a hole as small as a mustard seed.

The following metaphor is that the light of a firefly cannot be comparable to the brilliance of the sun. Again the Tibetan version has one more, saying that do not confuse a lion's roar with a jackal's cry. These metaphors describe different aspects of Mahayana, such as its profoundness, its vastness, or its fearlessness and so on.

“Purṇa, these bhiksus have long since generated the aspiration for the Mahayana but in the midst [of many rebirths] they have forgotten this intention.

In fact, these Bhikshus had already generated bodhichitta but they barely remembered it after their numerous death and birth in samsara as well as due to the obscurations caused by entering the womb. So these novice Bhikshus had great capacities for the Mahayana path but Purna didn't know that and tried to guide them onto the Hinayana path.

However, Vimalakirti had the wisdom to know their background and how they generated the Bodhichitta before. It could be troublesome if the teacher can't discern the capacities of the students, but after getting along with them for a while, he or she will have some idea of whether they are interested in Mahayana or Hinayana. All in all, the capacity and intention of each sentient being vary a lot.

Khenpo thinks that most of the audience might also have generated the Bodhichitta before, but just can't remember it due to many reasons such as entering the womb and being reborn as different sentient beings for so many lives.

“Why would you teach them with the Hinayana Dharma? When I consider the Hinayana, its wisdom is as minute as a blind man's, [and with it you are] unable to discriminate the sharp and dull faculties of all sentient beings.”

It is really difficult to discriminate the sharp and dull faculties of all sentient beings, and only people with the Mahayana wisdom can do it. There is a story in the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*:

Shariputra had two disciples and he taught A to contemplate the impurities of the human body and B to contemplate the breath. As they had practiced accordingly for many years but had no sign of progress, a wrong view arose in them, “The so-called Dharma is useless. We have practiced for such a long time but there is no progress at all!”

The Buddha observed with his wisdom and found that Shariputra taught them in a wrong way. They should switch their practices because A had the capacity for breathing meditation and B for impurity meditation: A was a goldsmith who had to breathe slowly and cautiously when making gold ware, so he was suited to contemplating the breath. B's job was doing laundries and he had a clear concept of “clean” and “dirty” when washing clothes, so it would be easier for him to achieve enlightenment by contemplating the impurity of body.

So the Buddha criticized Shariputra, “You should teach them according to their capacities. Just let them switch their practices.” After the two disciples adopted the different practices, both of them achieved Arhathood swiftly.

It is understandable that we will come across such situations when teaching disciples or practicing on our own. Some Dharma friends often say that what they practice is not suitable for them, so they want to look for other choices. It is necessary to find the practices which are more in sync with one’s capacity.

The Shrivakayana cannot measure up to the Mahayana because of their limitation of wisdom and skillful means. There is a story in the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*:

When the Buddha and Shariputra passed by Jetavana, a dove was being chased by an eagle. The dove was so scared that it looked everywhere for a place to hide. When it hid itself in the shadow of Shariputra, it was still quivering with fear, but when it came to the shadow of the Buddha, it felt more at ease and had no fear any more. This is because the Buddha had already eradicated all the cognitive and habitual obscurations.

Not only that, when Shariputra and the Buddha began to observe the past and future lives of this dove with their wisdom, Shariputra could only see its being born as a dove in the past 80,000 great kalpas and in the future 80,000 great kalpas. He couldn’t observe its lives beyond that time frame. However, the Buddha had the ability to know what it had been before it became a dove, and how it would be reborn as a human after great kalpas as numerous as the sands of the Ganges and finally attain liberation.

So we can see that the Shrivakas’ wisdom and ability are limited while the Buddha’s and Bodhisattvas’ are quite inconceivable. Some Buddhists would like to take an image of their root guru with them, actually the Buddha’s image or statue is more important to us because it has such a power of dharmata to naturally eliminate all our obstacles and help us to obtain omniscient wisdom. That the Buddha’s shadow can release the dove’s fear while Shariputra’s shadow cannot is a good example of the natural power of dharmata.

In fact, there are countless sentient beings that Bodhisattvas and Shrivakas cannot save, but the Buddha can. Also talking about gurus in this world, theoretically we should regard

all gurus who teach us the Dharma as the Buddha, but this is from the aspect of pure perception. Actually, not all of them can be compared to the Buddha. Not to mention the Buddha, some are even not qualified as a Bodhisattva, an Arhat, or even a good person.

Some good teachers or professors can give their hearts and souls to the students whereas some so-called Mahayana gurus have no such comparable compassion. If we insist on seeing such people as the Buddha, it is totally an excessive sanctification of Buddhism! So whenever we evaluate someone, we should assess the real situation and should not demonize or sanctify them according to our own preference.

Then Vimalakirti entered into samadhi and made the bhiksus aware of their previous lives. They had planted virtuous roots under five hundred buddhas and had rededicated them to their [eventual achievement of] *anuttara samyaksambodhi*. [Learning this], they immediately experienced a suddenly expansive reacquisition of that original inspiration. At this the bhiksus bowed their heads in reverence to Vimalakirti's feet. Then Vimalakirti explained the Dharma for them, and they never again retrogressed from [their progress to] *anuttara samyaksambodhi*.

Due to Vimalakirti's great power of samadhi, these Bhikshus suddenly recalled how they had made aspirations in front of the Buddhas, how they had aroused bodhichitta and how they had dedicated the merits. Just like watching a movie, or waking up from a dream, they clearly remembered everything. So they were so grateful to Vimalakirti, and bowed their heads at Vimalakirti's feet although he was a lay practitioner. Then Vimalakirti preached the Mahayana teachings to them, and helped them to abide in the Mahayana bodhichitta without retrogression.

According to the precepts of Hinayana or the Common Vehicle, monastics should not bow to lay practitioners; novice monks and nuns can bow to fully ordained monks and nuns, but not vice versa. But if the lay practitioner is an enlightened being, monastics can bow to him or her as a special case.

Some lay people today like to call themselves "acharya". If they are genuinely qualified, it is okay to claim so. But if they have no realization at all but just use the name "acharya" in

order to attract disciples, and those disciples also blindly praise and support them, their consequences could be disastrous!

Khenpo said that he once met some lay acharyas who were quite arrogant. In the past however, some tertons who could be called the genuine lay acharyas were very humble. They would say, “I don’t have any merit. I’m just a reincarnation of somebody.” They also respected the monastics and appeared to be scared if the monastics bowed to them.

According to some strict traditions and rules, if one chooses to manifest as a lay practitioner, even if he is a great master with high realization state, he had better be humble and respectful of the monastics. After all, it is remarkable to wear the Buddha’s robe (Kashaya) and from this aspect the monastics ought to be respected.

“I thought, ‘Shravakas do not consider the faculties of people and therefore should not explain the Dharma.’”

“Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

Purna thought that Shravakas had better not explain the Dharma because they failed to observe people’s faculties. As mentioned in the Tibetan and Xuanzang’s version, the reason is twofold: first, the wisdom of Shravakas are so limited that they cannot discern the sharp or dull faculty of beings; second, they cannot rest in samadhi constantly as the Buddha does, so they could make mistakes when giving the Dharma teachings. Given these reasons, Purna thus dare not go inquire about Vimalakirti’s illness.

In fact, the Buddha didn’t send ordinary disciples to visit Vimalakirti, but his major disciples who were foremost in wisdom, in supernatural power, in ascetic practice, in comprehending emptiness and in knowing the capacities of beings, etc. However, all of these outstanding disciples had been refuted by Vimalakirti. So we must understand the difference between common basic vehicle and uncommon Mahayana vehicle. For those who cannot accept these profound teachings at present, Khenpo encourages you to make great aspiration such as, “May I comprehend the unconceivable and profound wisdom of the Buddha. May I understand the secret meaning of the Buddha and eminent masters as soon as possible.” One should never blindly follow others’ advice and randomly reject or

defame such profound teachings, otherwise this person will fall into the lower realms for numerous lives, which would be a great pity!

Khenpo is happy for us to have the opportunity to receive these profound teachings. The human existence is so precious that it is a privilege for us to make the deep connection with Mahayana teachings and plant virtuous seeds in our mindstream within this limited lifetime! Khenpo himself most enjoys receiving the Dharma teaching, and he believes that most of the audience have the ability to accept these marvelous teachings, which has significant impact for the wellbeing of both self and others. It is not easy for everyone to take time out of extremely busy days and receive the teaching. We should all rejoice in such efforts because by doing so, we have made an auspicious connection with the ultimate truth revealed in Mahayana.

Khenpo is also appreciative of the simultaneous interpretations in Japanese and English provided by volunteers and all those who work together to make this live stream available. Without their joint efforts it would be impossible for so many people to listen to the Dharma all together. We all should cherish such precious opportunities.

Lecture 18

A Few Words Before the Teaching

To begin, Khenpo talks about the annual tradition of Dharma Protector's Day at Larung Gar; secondly, he points out that the Larung Buddhist Academy has no branches elsewhere; and thirdly, he mentions the attitude the audience needs to take while studying.

- The Dharma Protector's Day at Larung Gar

When giving this teaching, the following day was Dharma Protector's Day at Larung Gar, so Khenpo tells the story behind this annual tradition. Over 100 years ago, this remote Larung valley housed the mountain hermitage of the great tertön Dudjom Lingpa. Once, he had a dispute with a local goddess, who later was responsible for the death of his youngest daughter and the illness of his retinue, as well as other obstacles for the family. Dudjom Lingpa drove the goddess out of Larung valley to the Draggo area. Later, through the mediation of an eminent master, Dudjom Lingpa summoned the goddess back, who dissolved as a vapor into the summit of the western mountain at Larung Gar. Both parties made a pact: Every year on the 26th day of the sixth month on the Tibetan calendar, Dudjom Lingpa and the practitioners at the Larung valley shall make offerings to Dharma protectors headed by the goddess who, in return, will support and protect the Larung lineage by creating all desirable conditions and dispelling any unfavorable circumstances.

In the 1980s, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche founded Larung Buddhist Academy at the same mountain site of Dudjom Lingpa's old encampment. When His Holiness was alive, he made sure that all his disciples kept the promise of making offerings to the protectors every year. For the ceremony this year, Khenpo encourages the Sangha members at Larung Gar to climb to the tops of all the five mountains in good spirits to participate. Those who cannot make the trip or live beyond the area of Larung Gar can make offerings through visualization and chanting the liturgy at one's own place. Since Dharma protectors are endowed with wisdom and clairvoyance, they certainly will arrive to partake the offering.

- Activities Relating to Larung Buddhist Academy

Khenpo reminds the audience that Larung Buddhist Academy with its monastery situated in the Larung valley of Sichuan Province, China, remains its one and only physical location. There has never been any other so-called branch established anywhere else, be it in mainland China or overseas. If any place claims itself to be a "Larung branch", it is inappropriate and must be discouraged. Such stipulation is necessary in order to ease administrative burden and to prevent undue misunderstanding. Nonetheless, individuals following the Larung curriculum

are free to gather together in private settings to study and practice the Dharma, whether it's a handful of people or a large number. There is no need to formally institutionalize the study groups, which invites unnecessary hassle and questions.

There are plenty of dharma centers, monasteries, Buddhist institutes around the world. If they can bring benefits to people by offering authentic Dharma teaching and practice, everyone is encouraged to follow them and we deeply rejoice in their Dharma activities. But if it is another case in which they claim themselves as a branch of a certain organization while they don't carry on any dharma activities beneficial to others, it is meaningless. Even worse, they may bring negative influences to that organization, or cause unnecessary concerns for outsiders and incite government attention. Therefore, Khenpo stresses that when engaging in Dharma activities off site, such as protector's offering, pujas, or teachings, do not carry the banner of Larung Academy, but rather do it in one's own name.

Each year, Larung Buddhist Academy tries to observe Dharma activities, major or minor, on a regular basis. Any interested Dharma friends having devotion and karmic connection to the Academy are welcome to take part, free of charge, and make aspirations together—the Vajrasattva Mantra accumulation in spring is but one example. In sum, it's prudent to exercise skillful means and wisdom when conducting group Dharma practices at various locations.

- The Proper Attitude in Studying the Vimalakirti Sutra

Khenpo also mentions the upcoming timetable of this teaching, as he would take a break of about one month to accommodate his other commitments. Khenpo says that the time available to both sides is the result of our collective karma, and he hopes the audience will make arrangements accordingly for receiving teachings uninterrupted.

In terms of proper attitude, Khenpo urges everyone to regard the learning of *Vimalakirti Sutra* as a paramount event in life. Saying so is not because Khenpo himself is the lecturer, rather, it's that the benefit one obtains from a teaching is proportional to the importance one places on it. If you take it seriously and sincerely, you will obtain extraordinary blessing and benefit; whereas if you neglect it—skipping the lectures, listening mindlessly with a lousy mood, dozing off, forgetting the class, lacking motivation, and so on, you will get no benefit. Thus, examine yourself as to the level of effort and faith you put into this sutra study.

Khenpo notices that many of the audience find this sutra captivating. This is likely for several reasons: The sutra teaches many practical ways of transforming defilements onto the spiritual path; it expounds the uncommon principles of Mahayana Buddhism that is unheard of in the Shravaka and common vehicles; and those inclined to Vajrayana will find in it passages that reveal tantric pith instructions and profound practice. Moreover, in contrast to the dry, logical presentation of treatises such as the *Ornament of Realization* or those on Pramana, *Vimalakirti Sutra* depicts impressive teaching episodes featuring various characters in a lavish manner with wit and a brash humor, which invoke readers' curiosity, such as: "Now, who is the next?"

By saying that, Khenpo hopes that all the listeners, either online or on site, can gradually digest the meaning of each teaching through careful listening and reflection, so that everyone will receive the incredible blessings from Vimalakirti and Buddha Shakyamuni. After completing the study of this sutra, each of us would gain a good understanding of Mahayana Buddhism, cultivate certain level of conviction on the Mahayana spirit, and develop a fair view towards some uncommon behaviors in Chan and Vajrayana practices.

Indeed, holding a right view through proper study is quite essential for modern Buddhists. Nowadays, with different purposes, some people may claim themselves as Buddhists while intentionally or unintentionally destroying Buddhism. With a lack of the understanding of Buddhist tenets and just based on personal preferences, others may also feel happy with them and blindly follow such behaviors. Therefore, in order to protect ourselves and others from creating heavily negative karma, it is quite necessary to understand the Buddhist philosophies of different levels.

Who is Katyayana?

Previously Khenpo covered stories of five principle Shravaka disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha—Shariputta, Maudgalyayana, Mahakasyapa, Subhuti, and Purna, each of them were renowned in a certain aspect, such as being foremost in wisdom, supernatural power, understanding of emptiness, etc. Different story lines address their individual weakness in Dharma understanding. Next is the story of Katyayana.

Katyayana or Mahakatyayana is his Sanskrit name; in Pali, it is Kaccayana or Mahakaccana. Like a "delok" who can cross the threshold of death and return to tell about it, Katyayana could

travel freely to the lower realms, where he witnessed the judgment of the dead and the sufferings of hell.

When Buddha Shakyamuni was born as Prince Siddhartha, a sage seer Asita predicted that the baby prince would either become a Chakravarti King, the great universal ruler, or an ascetic who would attain enlightenment. This sage Asita was Katyayana's maternal uncle.

Katyayana was born into a rich Brahmin family. His father was the king's royal precept and his elder brother a bright, erudite teacher with a large retinue of disciples. Venerable Katyayana grew up to be just as extraordinary and his great wisdom attracted his brother's students. To avoid jealousy and family disharmony, Katyayana decided to leave the country and follow his uncle, Asita, for his spiritual practice.

Since Asita knew that Prince Siddhartha would attain Buddhahood one day, he had repeatedly advised Katyayana to seek out the Buddha and learn the path to liberation from him. Asita himself passed away before Prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment. Katyayana was luckily able to take refuge and receive monastic ordination vows from the Buddha and, very quickly, attained arhathood.

Being a remarkable arhat, Katyayana benefited sentient beings with his unique skillful means. During his time, there was a wealthy but ruthless householder. One of his many servants was an elderly woman whom he often mistreated severely. One day, when she went to a river to fetch water with a bottle on her back, she felt she couldn't take her misery anymore and, wailing loudly, she was about to kill herself. At the time, Katyayana passed by and heard her. He asked: "Old woman, why do you cry like this?" She answered: "I have been beaten up badly by my master and I am always in want of food, clothing, and shelter. Life has no meaning for me at all, I may as well be dead!"

Katyayana told her: "You need not kill yourself! Since you're so poor, why don't you just sell off your poverty?" The woman was at a loss: "Sell what? I own nothing to sell! How can poverty be sold?" Katyayana explained: "I will show you how. Now, wash your bottle, fill it up with water, and then offer it to me. By doing so your destitute fate will be no more." The woman's tears gave way to smiles; she hurriedly filled up the bottle with water and offered it to Katyayana, who then said a blessing and dedicated her merit. Due to this simple act of generosity, the woman was later reborn as a celestial lady in the gods' realm, and she never had to experience poverty in all her ensuing lifetimes.

In giving lectures, Khenpo often purposely inserts historical events or stories that can help illuminate his point. He encourages the audience to reflect on them constructively; for example, to understand the unerring law of causality from the story above. Otherwise, we may make ourselves vulnerable to the sway of Western materialism and flatly deny what seems inconceivable to a rigid mind. This is a serious drawback that will cause us to stop short in developing a comprehensive wisdom.

This is a brief introduction of Venerable Katyayana. Among the Buddha's disciples, he was renowned for his ability to analyze the Buddha's words—be they of provisional, ultimate, or hidden meaning—and to convey them to others in simple language. The Buddha praised Katyayana as the foremost in explaining the Dharma.

Katyayana's dialogue with Vimalakirti

The Buddha told Mahakatyayana, "You go inquire about Vimalakirti's illness."

Katyayana addressed the Buddha, "World-Honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? I remember once in the past, when the Buddha briefly explained the essentials of the Dharma to some bhiksus, and immediately afterward I expanded upon your meaning, discussing the meanings of impermanence, suffering, emptiness, no-self, and extinction. At the time Vimalakirti came and said to me,

Now the Buddha turned to Katyayana: "You don't seem to have any problem visiting places like the hell realm and the hungry ghost realm. Now, it's your turn to visit Vimalakirti today; he is quite ill and has been in seclusion for the past few days. Go inquire after his health on my behalf." Like the previous disciples, Katyayana declined the Buddha's request by recalling his encounter with Vimalakirti when he was giving a follow-up explanation on the meanings of impermanence, suffering, emptiness, no-self, and extinction. The Tibetan translation doesn't include emptiness and mentions only four topics.

Here it tells the way of imparting the Dharma at the Buddha's time. Apparently, the Buddha sums up the essential points first, and immediately afterward senior disciples like Katyayana will expand and elaborate on what the Buddha has taught and discuss its meaning in more detail. At Larung Gar, this gradual way of imparting teaching has been kept very much alive. Previously, a lecture given by His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche would be followed up

by two, three, or more layers of after-class instruction, even down to tutoring in small groups that provides timely aid to students. Giving guidance comprehensively is an essential segment in Dharma propagation, benefiting both the assisting instructors and students. Besides senior monastic instructors, Khenpo encourages more lay teaching-assistants to assume bigger roles; he also envisions having lay practitioners rise up as candidates for the degrees of Khenpo and Khenmo.

“O Katyayana, do not explain the Dharma of the true characteristic using the mental processes of generation and extinction (i.e., samsara).

Katyayana was enthusiastically expounding on impermanence, selflessness and so on, and then Vimalakirti suddenly appeared, only to criticize him with displeasure: “Venerable Katyayana, what’s the matter with you? You’re not supposed to explain the ultimate truth with a mind steeped in the concept of arising and ceasing.” Why? He explains as follows:

i) “Katyayana, the dharmas are ultimately neither generated nor extinguished: This is the meaning of impermanence.

Vimalakirti said, nothing is ever created; nothing is ever destroyed, and this is the true meaning of impermanence. Katyayana’s explanation of impermanence, as well as our normal understanding of it, is that an entity comes into existence first, and then becomes nothing at a later time. For instance, a person who was full of vigor and vitality yesterday suddenly drops dead today. We call that impermanence. Khenpo also calls attention to the beautiful flowers arranged in front of him. Those are wildflowers native to the Tibetan highland blooming only in summer. Now that fall and winter are approaching, such vibrant flowers will disappear very soon.

To Shravakayana, impermanence means that there is a prior “birth,” which is then followed by a final “death.” In contrast, Vimalakirti says what defines impermanence is that phenomena are originally unborn. In the Tibetan translation, this part is explicated from the perspective of three times: Nothing was ever produced in the past, nothing is produced now, and nothing will ever be produced in the future. Because there is no generation in three times, then nothing was ever extinguished in the past, nothing is extinguished now, and nothing will ever be extinguished in the future. Hence, the real meaning of impermanence should be “without arising, thus without ceasing.” Such a state of no birth and no death precludes the existence of anything everlasting, that’s what impermanence is.

In actuality, what is deemed as birth and death is nothing but a conceptual designation. The true nature of all phenomena transcends birth and death, as stated in the *Mahavaipulya Mahasanghata Sutra*:

*Although the essence of Dharmadhatu
Is devoid of any conceptualization,
All beings, because of their distorted minds,
Generate all kinds of conceptual ideas.*

The *Uttaratantra Shastra* has a similar explanation in that in the true reality of all phenomena, there is no birth of anything and thus no cessation. It is only due to sentient beings' delusion that a myriad of phenomena appear in the conventional world as arising and ceasing.

Some Dharma instructors may make the same mistake that Katyayana did when they explain impermanence. Although from the relative perspective, we can regard impermanence as what Katyayana explained, but from the ultimate perspective, there is no arising and ceasing, so the ultimate meaning of impermanence is without arising and ceasing, which is a fairly profound view. This is the first point Vimalakirti corrected to Katyayana.

ii) “The five skandhas are empty throughout, with no arising: This is the meaning of suffering.

Vimalakirti corrected Katyayana's second point as to the true meaning of suffering. What is suffering? Generally speaking, as the *Four Hundred Stanzas of the Middle Way* says,

*The impermanent is definitely harmed,
What is harmed is not pleasurable,
Therefore all that is impermanent
Is said to be suffering.*

Impermanence causes disintegration and therefore produces aversion. For instance, people complain: “I'm so miserable because I'm getting uglier,” or “I'm so sad because I got divorced.” Wherever there is impermanence, there will be suffering.

However, actually the true meaning of suffering is that the five skandhas are empty throughout, with no arising. The five skandhas are the aggregates that make up our whole mental and physical existence: form, feeling, perceptions, mental activity, and consciousness. These

aggregates are insubstantial and no true things can arise from them; this is suffering. Suffering is not merely feeling bad. On relative level, it means suffering of suffering, suffering of change, and all pervasive suffering. On ultimate level, it pertains to the empty nature of the five aggregates that is unborn. Only by penetrating the true nature of the five aggregates can one grasp the ultimate meaning of suffering, which again is very profound.

iii) “The dharmas ultimately do not exist: this is the meaning of emptiness.

Next, Vimalakirti expounded the true meaning of emptiness. According to the Shrivakayana, emptiness denotes the non-existence of all phenomena. However, here it means nothing ultimately exists, including emptiness itself. That is, both “emptiness” and “non-emptiness” do not truly exist. Ordinary beings believe all phenomena exist, and after careful investigation, we come to the conclusion that everything does not exist. Shrivakas regard the non-existence of all phenomena as emptiness. But in true reality, even non-existence is not tenable, which is inferred only for the sake of communication.

As the sutra of *The Play in Full (Lalitavistara)* says: “This wheel is inexpressible because it is beyond all paths of audible words. This wheel is inconceivable because it is beyond the realm of conceptual mind. It is without example because it is beyond exemplification. It is as of great equality as the sky.” Similar passages are found in Chan tradition. Since the nature of emptiness cannot be expressed by words or any other means, it is often illustrated by a metaphor, “It is like space.” But, if analyzed in the ultimate sense, the emptiness of space proves to have nothing identifiable either. “Space” is but a convenient and fitting description of emptiness. Provisionally emptiness can be explained as non-existence; but ultimately speaking, emptiness is beyond any conceptual thought. This is a crucial point.

iv) “There is no self in the self, yet no duality: this is the meaning of no-self.

The fourth point pertains to the true meaning of no-self. To Shrivakas, no-self means the non-existence of all things, in the way that there is no person truly existing, then anything belongs to that person does not exist either. However, in the absolute sense, neither “self” nor “no-self” exists in its own right, and the two are on equal footing and have no duality. If “self” does not exist, then “no-self” cannot exist either, for it is dependent on the former.

The *Avatamsaka Sutra* states:

*Understanding that all things
Are inherently as pure as space,
Thus not distinguishing self and no-self
Is the true awareness of the awakened.*

The true essence of all phenomena is like space, free from “self” and “no-self”. Thus the true meaning of “no-self” entails the supreme state of equalness of all phenomena.

v) “The dharmas were originally not burning and will not become extinguished now: this is the meaning of extinction.’

In the Tibetan version, it says that phenomena have neither intrinsic substance nor any other sort of substance, henceforth, nothing is ever produced. As there is nothing produced, its corresponding extinction certainly does not exist, just as a fire does not burn, it certainly will not become extinguished. So the true nirvana is the realization of the natural state of no birth and no cessation.

This is of paramount importance. Having fathomed that phenomena have neither birth nor cessation, one reaches the highest level of realization, as described in the *Bodhicaryavatara*:

*When something and its nonexistence
Both are absent from before the mind,
No other option does the latter have:
It comes to perfect rest, from concepts free.*

In the end, any and all characteristics vanish without a trace; nothing remains as a reference point whatsoever. This, then, is genuine extinction, or nirvana.

Again, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* says,

*All things are birthless
And have no extinction either.
Those who understand in this way
Will see the Buddha.*

Because there is no birth in the first place, there is no extinction later. Whoever penetrates this notion has truly beheld the face of the Buddha. We always think that the Tathagata has eyes,

nose, and form, but this is not the ultimate Tathagata. As taught in the *Diamond Sutra*: “Who sees me by form, who seeks me in sound, is on the wrong path and cannot perceive the Tathagata.” Only through the careful observation with the wisdom of the Middle Way, one can understand the true reality of birthlessness and deathlessness, and that is the ultimate Tathagata.

“When [Vimalakirti] explained this Dharma, the bhiksus’ minds attained emancipation. Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

In Chapter Fifteen of *The Root Stanzas on the Middle Way*, it quotes a specific teaching the Buddha gave to Katyayana:

*In his Counsel to Katyayana,
The Lord, through understanding
Both existent and nonexistent things,
Has rejected both the views: “this is” and “this is not”.*

Likewise, in Mipham Rinpoche’s commentary on this treatise he also quotes the relative scriptures expounded specifically for Katyayana, saying that worldly beings cling either to existence or to nonexistence, and thus find no liberation, therefore the Buddha told Katyayana that both existence and nonexistence are the extremes of conceptual thought and one should stay clear from them.

A question is raised here: Have Shravakas realized the selflessness of phenomena? This subject has been debated among Tibetan commentators of the Middle Way. The above quote indicates that the Buddha has expounded to Katyayana on the selflessness of phenomena, which is free from existence and nonexistence. With Katyayana’s sharp faculty, it was impossible for him to miss the gist of it. Hence, using Katyayana as a representative of Shravakas, this scriptural evidence affirms that Shravakas have realized certain level of selflessness of phenomena.

Aniruddha’s dialogue with Vimalakirti

The Buddha told Aniruddha, “You go inquire about Vimalakirti’s illness.”

Aniruddha was well known for his supreme divine eyes, foremost in clairvoyance among the Buddha’s disciples. *The Collective Sutra of the Buddha's Past Acts (Abhiniskramanasutra)* tells that once Aniruddha fell asleep when the Buddha was imparting a discourse. The Buddha

scolded him, saying: “You are committing a severe offense now, which will cause you to not see buddhas for thousands of years, like clams, oysters, and other creatures living in shells. Why did you become a monastic in the first place? Was it because of your fear of thieves and rulers, instead of wanting to hear, reflect, and practice on the Dharma?” Having been reprimanded thus, Aniruddha felt so ashamed that he vowed that never again would he sleep! He exerted himself to practice with such a drastic and unflagging resolution that after seven days and seven nights of no sleep, he went totally blind.

It says in scriptures that all creatures need food to stay alive, and the human body will die if it was without food intake for seven days and seven nights. Sleep is the nutrition for eyes, and the eye will go blind if sleep is deprived for seven days and seven nights. So one must sleep to protect eyes. In the autobiography of the great female tertön Sera Khandro, she mentioned that once she almost died and her external breath was on the verge of stopping. At that juncture, Tulku Drime Ozer was grieving extremely sorrowfully and a big tear of his fell into her ear, which she felt as if hitting her heart, then she came back to life. Hence, a drop of tear appears as just a drop of water, but sometime it’s endowed with great power.

After Aniruddha lost his sight, the Buddha personally bestowed him blessings and gave him special transmission on the Vajra Illuminating Light Samadhi. Aniruddha attained the divine eye straightaway that enabled him to perceive a myriad of phenomena in the whole universe. This is how Aniruddha accomplished the divine eye. ■

Aniruddha addressed the Buddha, “World-Honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why?”

“I remember once in the past I was walking quietly in a certain location. At the time a Brahma king named Adorned Purity, in the company of ten thousand Brahmas generating pure radiance, proceeded to where I was. He bowed to my feet in reverence and asked me, ‘How much, Aniruddha, can you see with your divine eye?’

“I answered, ‘Sir, I see the trimegachilocosm of Shakyamuni’s buddhaland as if I were looking at a mango in the palm of my hand.’

“Then Vimalakirti came and said to me, ‘O Aniruddha, is the seeing of the divine eye a constructed characteristic, or is it an unconstructed characteristic? If it is a constructed characteristic, then it is equivalent to the five supernormal powers of the heterodox paths.

If it is an unconstructed characteristic then it is unconditioned and should be without seeing (i.e., “views”).’ World-Honored One, at the time I remained silent.

Aniruddha told the Buddha his previous encounter with Vimalakirti. The Brahma king and his retinue all had supernatural powers and emitted beams of pure light, and they were curious about the ability of Aniruddha’s divine eye. Then Aniruddha told them that he can see the trimegachiliocosm of Shakyamuni’s buddhaland, a billion worlds, as if looking at a mango in his palm.

Ordinary people may have difficulty to truly imagine such a boundless world system. According to Buddhist cosmology, each world has at its center a Mount Meru surrounded by seven oceans and seven rings of golden mountains separating them. Outside are the four continents and eight subcontinents. We humans live on the southern continent called “Jambudvipa”. This entire world is then surrounded by the outer iron mountains. A thousand of such worlds constitute a “thousandfold world system”. A thousand of these makes up a second-order “thousandfold world system”. Then, when multiplied a thousand times further, this makes a “third-order world system”, or “trichiliocosm”, a universe of a billion worlds, which is translated as trimegachiliocosm in the text. A single supreme nirmanakaya buddha, for example, Buddha Shakyamuni, has mastery over such a world system.

Upon hearing Aniruddha’s answer to the king, Vimalakirti appeared unexpectedly and questioned Aniruddha: “Reverend Aniruddha, is the seeing of the divine eye conditioned in nature? Or is it unconditioned in nature? You claimed that you saw the entire billion worlds. If the seeing is conditioned by other causes, then it’s no different from the five miraculous powers of the non-Buddhist teachers. If it is unconditioned by anything, unconstructed, then there is no such thing as the perceiver and the perceived. What on earth have you seen exactly?”

According to Master Kuiji, another way to understand Vimalakirti’s question is whether a deluded mind is employed when using the divine eye to perceive the world. With a deluded mind, everything being seen is illusory; while an enlightened mind leads to pure perception, which is the discrimination of wisdom. The latter is possessed by buddhas and bodhisattvas, who can clearly see everything by using their valid cognition of pure perception.

“Hearing his words, the Brahmas attained something unprecedented, immediately revered [Vimalakirti], and asked him, ‘Who in this world has the true divine eye?’ Vimalakirti said, ‘There is the Buddha, the World-Honored One, who has attained the

true divine eye. Always in *samadhi*, he sees all the buddha lands without any characteristic of duality.'

Aniruddha, in spite of his renown for supreme divine eye, was not adept in debating. He couldn't come up with an answer to Vimalakirti's question and only remained silent. The Brahmas, however, were all impressed by the exchanges they had just witnessed. Bowing to Vimalakirti, they asked: "Is there anyone in this world who possesses the true divine eye?"

Vimalakirti answered: "In the world, it is the Buddha who has the true divine eye. He is constantly in the state of *samadhi* without wavering and, having penetrated the truth of all phenomena, he sees all buddha lands without the characteristic of being conditioned or unconditioned, and not being affected by the duality of the perceiver and the perceived." Here Vimalakirti is explicating the Buddha's quality of having realized the true divine eye.

The Miscellaneous Metaphors Sutra tells a story: One day, while Maudgalyayana entered meditative *samadhi*, he saw 8,000 worlds, which made him quite conceited. He thought to himself: "I wonder if the Buddha could see this many worlds?" Then he walked arrogantly with the pace of a lion. The Buddha noticed and asked: "As a monk, you're supposed to conduct yourself in a serene and low-key manner, how come you are behaving like this today?" Maudgalyayana replied: "Buddha, I saw 8,000 worlds today during meditation, and I believe I have surpassed you." The Buddha said: "That sounds excellent, but it's not a big deal. In fact, the buddha fields I can see in each of the ten directions are as many as the number of sands in ten Ganges Rivers altogether." Then the Buddha, with his miraculous power, caused Maudgalyayana to see all these numerous worlds. Like a big mountain suddenly collapsing, Maudgalyayana felt extremely ashamed and regretful and fell to the ground; he scolded himself severely and deeply confessed his arrogance. He said, "Had I known the Buddha's miraculous power, I would rather fall into the Avici Hell for hundreds of eons instead of attaining Arhathood."

The Buddha often uses the metaphor of "grains of sand in the Ganges River" to indicate large numbers. Also, we've heard the Buddhist term "trichilocosm", a unit of a billion-world system in which sentient beings live. People with a narrow and provincial attitude may find these ideas impenetrable and unacceptable. However, by doing a little searching, we'll find that the universe is indeed immense with its countless and ever-growing galaxies. On the other hand, small-scale entities are equally intriguing. Scientists tell us that we typically have over 50,000

microbes teeming on our unwashed hands, which, of course cannot be seen by naked eyes and is often refuted. Nonetheless, biological experiments have proved it to be true.

In the modern era, the concept of scales and numbers is evolving. For example, a “googol” is a number of digit 1 followed by one hundred zeroes; other large numbers are found in astronomy and cosmology where distances are measured by billions of light years across. Actually, in ancient Buddhist scriptures, there exist plenty of descriptions of infinite world systems and unfathomable phenomena. Many people, however, reject these Buddhist notions outright, are doubtful, or at best accept them only partially. Indeed, many Western Buddhists tend to pick and choose Buddhist doctrines. For example, they tend to sidestep or avoid teachings on reincarnation, hell realms, and karmic law that are prominent in all Buddhist tenets. Granted, these are difficult topics that may not resonate well with their cultural background or habitual rational mind. However, in order to be an authentic Buddhist and comprehensively understand the full scope of Buddhist philosophy, one has to stay humble and cultivate devotion towards these teachings.

Moreover, in the Buddhadharma, there is a distinction between provisional meaning and ultimate meaning. A teaching of ultimate meaning is often difficult to grasp in the first place; when this happens, we should give it the benefit of doubt and strive to realize it with an open heart. This would be a smart way to go. Otherwise, a flat rejection at the outset may shut the door of fully understanding the Dharma for good.

Nowadays, it’s not uncommon to hear claims from scientifically advanced West such as, “I’m a Buddhist, but I don’t believe in rebirth or X or Y, etc.” Its proponents include well-known Buddhist scholars who have previously translated Buddhist treatises and have been fully ordained monks for years. This agnostic stance of “a Buddhist without belief”, even though being frowned upon by mainstream Buddhism, has nonetheless attracted large number of followers.

Besides, some congregations spice up whatever activities they advocate in—yoga, Osho movement, or whatnot—with the flavor of Buddhism and rebrand them using exotic and mystical names. Naive youths are impressed and, regarding them creative and desirable, they are drawn into the fold. Such a genre-bending hodgepodge of Buddhism and other beliefs is totally bizarre and disheartening.

Mipham Rinpoche depicted those with misguided cleverness in *Instruction of How to Be a Good Person and Attain Liberation*:

Having some intelligence, but not the ultimate wisdom;

Being clever, but using it to play tricks;

Pretending to be smart, but it's just craft and cunning;

These are faults due to carelessness and imprudence.

He warned that these people would not realize the ultimate wisdom even if they have studied Pramana and five other major treatises; instead, their knowledge may make them become more deceitful. In the end, they will stop at nothing in engaging in all kinds of evil deeds, as they are smart enough to know people's weaknesses and preferences. For instance, knowing it's trendy to use certain catchphrases on the Internet, they will flaunt them to promote their own ideas. Khenpo encourages younger audiences to memorize the above stanza of Mipham Rinpoche to guard themselves against becoming entrapped. In fact, H.H. Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche also quoted this stanza quite often.

Again, Khenpo advises against selling spirituality. Today many self-proclaimed "Buddhist Masters" parade in whatever masqueraded forms; we must not follow the herd blindly. Keep our vigilance and train in mindfulness and wisdom. When we have grasped the doctrines of sutras and tantras, we'll become bulletproof against all deceits and temptations.

"At this Adorned Purity Brahma King and his attending five hundred Brahma kings all generated the intention to achieve *anuttara samyaksambodhi*. They bowed to Vimalakirti's feet, then instantly disappeared. Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness."

Here "five hundred Brahma kings" may indicate that only a small part of the retinue generated bodhichitta, but in the Tibetan version, it is all the ten thousand Brahmas. So recalling his predicament when encountering Vimalakirti, Aniruddha declined the Buddha's request to make a goodwill visit.

Lecture 19

After giving the oral transmission, Khenpo jokingly says that some of the audience do not understand the value of oral transmission. In that case one may regard oral transmission as a way of giving blessing through the Buddhist sutra, so as to make one safe, rich, healthy, beautiful, etc. Particularly, beauty becomes a more and more important issue for modern people. Under such a circumstance, Buddhists also need to somewhat follow this trend, otherwise unattractive Buddhists would cause others to have negative impression on Buddhism. So Khenpo finds himself more concerned with Buddhists' appearance. Receiving oral

transmission and dharma teaching can obviously bring one outer and inner beauty. Khenpo says, “Just like sprinkling holy water with flowers is a way of blessing in Theravada tradition, chanting the oral transmission is my way of giving blessing!”

The ongoing teachings of Vimalakirti has awed us in that his view and practice are really superior to most of the people, including both monastics and lay practitioners. The ten great disciples of the Buddha were all monastics and foremost in specific fields, like leading scientists today such as top biologists, top physicists, top medical scientists and so on. However, they were all inferior in wisdom than Vimalakirti. This happened in Tibetan Buddhist history as well, as some lay practitioners of high realization would act as the abbot of monasteries, or the root guru of ordained people. In Theravada tradition, incidents like this would be regarded as inappropriate, but this is not necessarily so in Mahayana and Vajrayana tradition. So, it is necessary to open and broaden one’s mind during the study of *Vimalakirti Sutra*, or one would be confined to his or her own tradition and remain blind to other schools, failing to see the panoramic view of the sacred Dharma teachings.

Worldwide speaking, Buddhists mainly consisted of lay practitioners, with a small fraction of monastics on the side. So, following such a shining example of Vimalakirti, it is important for lay practitioners to develop right views and cultivate right practices, to achieve a certain level of realization and to become a person full of wisdom and compassion.

A great advantage of lay practitioners is that they can easily spread valuable teachings to people around them. Unlike the monastics who have left their families and stay in isolated monasteries, lay Buddhists could at least share the Dharma teachings with their family members. For example, a mother can at least teach some basic principles of Buddhism to her children, especially the preteen ones, and train them to behave accordingly. The monastics do not have such an advantage. Hence lay Buddhists should take these opportunities to give the Dharma teachings and benefit others. Though lacking the unfathomable realization of Vimalakirti, you can still inspire those who you are familiar with using Buddhist wisdom through all different skillful means.

Upali’s dialogue with Vimalakirti

The Buddha told Upali, “You go inquire about Vimalakīrti’s illness.”

Upali is foremost in upholding pure precepts among the Buddha's disciples. During the first Buddhist council after the Buddha's passing into parinirvana, Ananda, Khasyapa and Upali were responsible for the compilation of Sutras, Abhidharma, and Vinaya respectively. Upali was remarkable for observing impeccable precepts. According to the *Vinaya Sutra* of the Sarvastivada school, Upali upheld the purest precepts not only in this life as the disciple of Buddha Shakyamuni, but also in a previous life when relying on another Buddha, to whom Upali had vowed to keep pure precepts in all the lives to come.

Upali was born in the Shudra class, the lowest caste of the ancient India. Before becoming a monk, he worked as a barber for the princes of the Shakya tribe. When the Shakya princes such as Ananda and Aniruddha resolved to become the Buddha's disciple and get ordained, Upali was required to escort them to the Buddha's place. Upon their arriving, the princes left all their garments and jewels to him and asked him to go back. Then Upali thought to himself, "All these noble princes have renounced their secular lives and seek for enlightenment, why should I stick to my poor life?" So he also resolved to follow the Buddha and become a monk. No longer interested in the garments and jewels, he just hung them on tree branches and wished that some travelers might take them for free.

On account of his practice in previous lives, Upali instantly became a monk of full ordination upon hearing the Buddha's words, "Ehi Bhikkhu!" (Come, Bhikkhu!) And then he attained Arhathood immediately. However, the Shakya princes were required to go through the seven-day observation before getting ordained. At first the princes could not be convinced and still held their conceit towards Upali, because this person used to be their barber but was quickly ordained and converted into a higher-rank bhikkhu to whom they should pay respect. In order to break the princes' arrogance, the Buddha said, "Our Sangha makes no distinction on the basis of occupation or social class. The high position belongs to whomever has better precepts and realization." As a result, the princes paid sincere reverence to Upali.

Back then, there was a bhikkhu who had been sick for six years and Upali wanted to help him. The bhikkhu told him, "I was fond of drinking but I could no longer indulge in this habit anymore after the ordainment. This is how my sickness was caused. I would regain health if I am allowed to drink again." Then Upali went to ask for the Buddha's instruction and the Buddha replied, "I only made the precepts for the physical and mental health of sentient beings. I will let you do whatever you see fit." So Upali bought five liters of wine for the sick bhikkhu and told him to regard it as medicine while drinking it. Then the bhikkhu recovered quickly

and by receiving the teaching from Upali, he soon achieved Arhathood, consequently no longer craved alcohol. The Buddha praised Upali for his skillful means of benefiting others. Because of that, the Buddha entrusted Upali to carry forward his teachings on Vinaya.

Upali addressed the Buddha, “world-honored one, I dare not to accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why?”

“I remembered once in the past, there were two bhikkhus who had violated the practice of the Vinaya but from their shame did not dare ask you about it. They came to ask me: ‘O Upali, we have violated the Vinaya and are sincerely ashamed, not daring to ask the Buddha about it. We want you to explain our doubts and the [need for] repentance, so that we may be relieved of the transgressions.’ I immediately explained [the matter] to them according to the Dharma.

According to some commentaries, there once were two bhikkhus who dwelled in a quiet place where they built a small shack to practice meditation. One morning, one bhikkhu was sleeping in the shack while the other went out to practice walking meditation. A woman who was gathering firewood passed by and took a glimpse in the shack out of curiosity, as the door was wide open. She found out the sleeping bhikkhu was very handsome and lusted for him. They had sex and shortly after the other bhikkhu came back, and the woman fled. Driven by astonishment and intended to verify what happened, the other bhikkhu chased the woman relentlessly, who slipped, fell down the cliff and died. So one bhikkhu violated the precept of no sexual misconduct and the other no killing in this case.

Undoubtedly, their practice in the shack was a thorough failure and they were devastated. Things happen like this. Despite what one hoped at the beginning, obstacles come unannounced. In just one morning, these two bhikkhus failed and found this great obstacle in their path of practice. They dared not go to confess in front of the Buddha, because the Buddha was so solemn and awful that they were too ashamed to confront their sins before him. Another reason is that the Buddha was omniscient and they were afraid to be scolded in the public and banned from the sangha. All concerns and worries combined, they went to inquire of Upali, as they heard he was foremost in observing precepts. They wished Upali could kindly remove their anxieties and remorse, clarify their doubts about the consequence of these infractions and also give them advice of how to confess their faults and regain a pure body of precepts.

Then just based on the common vehicle's teaching on precepts, Upali said, "Your Pratimoksa vows cannot be redeemed. There is no hope anymore." In the teaching of common vehicle, those who have violated the root precepts of Pratimoksa were like being decapitated and hence there is no way to remedy anymore. The two bhikkhus' infractions belong to the Four Defeats (Parajikas), meaning they had been completely defeated by mental afflictions and fell from monkhood immediately. Therefore, Upali continued, "You have no chance to start over again in this life but to plummet to hell and suffer numerous pains."

Upholding the precepts of Pratimoksa is like planting a tree. If one violates the root precepts, for example, committing the Four Defeats, then the tree of the precept body is cut off from the root and other virtues, just like leaves, flowers and fruits, can never grow afterwards. Those who break the root precepts will suffer in hell for thousands of millions of years. Indeed, even sharing a room with a bhikkhu who has violated root precepts for a night would bear the consequence of suffering in hell for sixty thousand years. To conclude, according to the Vinaya teaching in common vehicle, the consequence of breaking root precepts is fatal.

In the *Sutra of Admonishment to the Bhikkhus*, it is said that for people who can uphold pure precepts, precepts are the source of happiness; but for those who break precepts, precepts will lead them towards pain and suffering since the consequence of transgressions are serious. After Upali explained the matter, the two bhikkhus were devastated and began to weep, feeling that all hopes have been stripped away. Actually, in some cases, explaining the precepts in the context of common vehicle's teachings only while ignoring the aspects of other higher vehicles could be misleading.

"At the time Vimalakirti came and said to me,

"O Upali, do not increase these two bhikkhus' transgressions. You should just remove [the transgressions] and not disturb their minds. Why?"

At this critical moment Vimalakirti appeared again, who pacified the two heartbroken bhikkhus and dissuaded Upali from continuing. As a matter of fact, it is not easy to observe pure monastic or lay precepts in times of degeneration. Thus whenever encountering people who have violated precepts, one should not intimidate them like, "You are finished. Your life is pointless and you might as well die..." Instead, it is vital that one should comfort them and give them chances of confession.

As *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* and *The Sutra of the Ten Wheels of Ksitigarbha* goes: Of the wise, there are two kinds: one is those who do not commit evil deeds, and the other is those who repent after committing evil deeds; Of the ignorant, there are again two kinds: one is those who commit evil deeds, and the other is those who conceal their faults. Among people, only a few wise and enlightened beings have hardly committed any sin. So like Vimalakirti's words to Upali, we should apply skillful means to encourage people who have committed evil deeds to confess and purify their negativities, not to scold them with the karmic law of cause and effect. Similarly, His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche taught us: "Do not lose your own path. Do not disturb the minds of others."

In regard with the Mahayana teaching, when a violator is searing with pain and remorse, instead of blaming him, we should let him know that all conditioned phenomena, including his offense, are dreamlike and try to awake the violator from this bad dream. Another way is to remind him merits of practicing good deeds rather than emphasizing faults of violating precepts. *The King of Samadhi Sutra* reads, "If in the sangha, you find someone breaking precepts, do not praise the merits of observing precepts, but praise the merits of generosity and other good deeds." Actually, the merits of upholding precepts are greater than giving alms. But by doing so, one can reignite the violator's hope, instead of aggravating his pain. For example, due to the previous negative karma, a monastic gives up ordination and resume secular life, thus no longer entitled to live with the sangha. Although this is a severe negative situation, it does not mean that this person has no hope anymore. He or she can still be a lay practitioner with faith and virtues and engage in all good deeds such as giving alms, making offerings, conducting preliminary practices and so on. Of course, it is best to stay away from creating negative karma in the first place.

In certain cases, it is a bit uncompassionate to strictly confine everyone to the Pratimoksa vows, especially for beginners. We should guide beginners step by step so that they can embrace Buddhism with open arms. Nowadays, many people interested in Buddhism are discouraged by harsh regulations that are hard to abide by and then turn away from converting to Buddhism. What a pity!

On the other hand, we must know that observing the precepts of Pratimoksa is quite essential, and they are required by the Buddha and should not be modified by any person at will. Nowadays some Buddhist academies and monasteries particularly in the West and Taiwan are extreme in revolution. They try to simply deny the Eight Rules (Garudhammas) of Respect that

are required of fully ordained Buddhist nuns. Some dharma masters even called up a meeting and then created the so-called modernized precepts for bhikkhunis. This is absolutely inappropriate. Only the Buddha can make precepts, and no matter how open the society has become, no one can change them at will.

Khenpo mentioned that when he was visiting a college in the USA, a feminist professor had spent the whole afternoon trying to persuade him to restore bhikkhuni order in Tibetan Buddhism. She believed that some high lamas can easily restore the lineage by calling up a conference, having some discussions and then asking a few bhikkhunis to give the transmission. Khenpo pointed out that it was not an easy task, which could not be simply accomplished with an enthusiasm of gender equality. Vinaya can never be likened to a company's policies or regulations that can be easily set up by some key leaders.

Before entering the parinivana, the Buddha told Ananda, "In the future, you should adjust some precepts in accordance to times and environments." In other words, the Buddha had prepared to loosen and give permission of modifying some precepts in the future. However, due to the disturbance of the Mara, Ananda did not catch the Buddha's words, and failed to ask the Buddha how to do it properly. This is a big pity.

So for us Buddhists, regardless of which tradition one follows, be it Theravada, Han or Tibetan Buddhism, one should strictly observe precepts, because they were made by the Buddha and were closely connected to the karmic law of causes and effects throughout lives. The administrative regulations of a monastery can be altered on an as-needed basis. For example, we use yellow drapes to separate male from female in our shrine hall. When the number of women grew, we adjusted the position of drapes to accommodate them. By contrast, it would be ridiculous if we add one rule to the thirteen rules of the Parajika (13 samghadisesas) or decide to remove certain one from the four root precepts.

As His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche had repeatedly stressed, "When concerning precepts, we should carefully observe what is permitted and what is forbidden by the Buddha, for he thoroughly understands the karmic law of causes and effects; we should exactly follow the sutra taught by the Buddha and keep to rituals set by our lineage masters." So Khenpo hopes that the Vinaya masters would be prudent and do not change precepts as they wish.

In this modern age, some feel that traditional precepts no longer cater to the society and decide to modernize it by removing all rules that bind them; some monastics under-appreciate the

value of precepts and decide for themselves which rules are to be upheld and which are not. Some famous or powerful figures think that by assembling monks and nuns in the temple and voting, they can add or scratch out some precepts to conform to this age. This is absurd and highly irrational.

The overly open attitude towards Vinaya only indicates one's limited knowledge of it, mistaking it as a mere formality for Buddhists. Take the professor that Khenpo mentioned for instance who works for a great institute of Tibetology and has made significant contributions towards it. Still, nobody can alter precepts at will since the karmic law of cause and effect can be only fully perceived by the Buddha. There is no exemption to it. For instance, if a master casually changes precepts during ordainment, then very possibly the bhikkhus-to-be and bhikshunis-to-be will not actually attain the body of precept. In that case, all the associated observances would be in vain and all their efforts wasted.

Therefore, one should remain modest and prudent in observing precepts. Concerning whether a change or modification is in accordance with the Buddha's teaching or not, opinions and instructions should be sought from Vinaya masters. And as Vinaya masters, they need to be brave enough to point out the inappropriate interpretation of precepts, taking others' slander all in stride.

“The nature of those transgressions does not reside within, it does not reside without, and it does not reside in the middle.

Here Vimalakirti explained the nature of transgressions from the ultimate level, which does not exist inside or outside the body, or somewhere in-between. The nature of transgressions does not exist at all. The *Mahayana Sutra of Mind Contemplation* goes that,

*Look into the nature of all crimes and negatives,
Which arise from confusion and deluded thoughts,
Thus realize that they all have no inherent essence at all
And cannot be found in the past, present or future.*

So why Vimalakirti told Upail not to increase these two bhikkhus' transgressions? The negativities are only caused by the deluded mind and their nature is empty and cannot be found in the past, present or future. It is impossible to retain a past crime, to seize a future crime, and even to hold onto a present crime. Again the *Mahayana Sutra of Mind Contemplation* says,

*Neither in the inner, outer, nor the middle of oneself does crime exist,
And its empty nature is never and ever moved.
Such ultimate truth is free from all conceptions,
Only can be realized by enlightened beings.*

“As the Buddha has explained, when their minds are defiled, sentient beings are defiled. When their minds are purified, sentient beings are purified. The mind likewise does not reside within, does not reside without, and does not reside in the middle. Just so is the mind, and just so are transgression and defilement. The dharmas are also likewise, in not transcending suchness.

Here Vimalakirti talked about the dependence of transgressions. He first quoted a Buddha’s teaching from a sutra of Shravakayana to suit the background of Upali and the two bhikkhus. If a person’s mind becomes pure, then his afflictions will be purified, his environment and the living beings around him will also be purified. Transgressions arise dependently from the mind. When we observe the mind, it does not truly exist at all. It cannot be found within the six consciousnesses, nor the six objects outside, nor somewhere in-between. Hence the mind, as the dependence of transgression, is empty, so is the transgression. Mipham Rinpoche’s *Beacon of Certainty* says,

*Because there is nothing impure with respect to
The purity of one’s own nature,
There is the equality of natural luminosity.*

It means that all negative karma that need to be purified are fundamentally pure, because all phenomena are equally luminous and empty and there is nothing impure in nature. So all phenomena do not transcend suchness, the nature of Tathagata. It is also explained in the *Sutra of Treasure Chest* that everything shares the same nature of Tathagata.

The *Beacon of Certainty* was composed by Mipham Rinpoche at the age of 7. It is a great treatise that contains many profound instructions on purity and emptiness. Khenpo says that in his early years at Larung gar, every day he woke up early to recite the teachings from this book, as he found the teaching such as “there is nothing impure in nature” very inspiring.

“Just so, Upali, when one attains emancipation using the characteristics of the mind, is it (i.e., the mind) defiled or not?” I said, ‘It is not.’

“Vimalakirti said, ‘The characteristics of the minds of all sentient beings are likewise, in being without defilement.

“O Upali, to have false concepts is defilement; to be without false concepts is purity.

“Confusion is defilement, and the absence of confusion is purity.

“To grasp the self is defilement, and not to grasp the self is purity.

Vimalakirti asked Upali if there is any defilement when one fully realizes the nature of the mind and attains liberation. This answer is minutely explained in many Mahayana and Vajrayana texts. Some people of Mahayana capacity may feel Vimalakirti’s teachings are exactly what they need, like tailor-made. With Upali’s answer, Vimalakirti told him that the minds of all living beings have the same nature of purity, and defilements only come from the deluded mind, or conceptual mind. As Dignaga says, the deluded mind creates the three realms. In the *Forest of Gems in the Garden of the Dharma*, it says,

*Karmic obscurations that are as vast as the ocean
Are all generated from the deluded mind.
Those whoever wants to purify them,
Should seek to realize the ultimate truth.*

To be clear, to purify the deluded mind by realizing the ultimate truth is not as easy as one imagines. Some people like the soothing pet phrase such as “delusions are pure by themselves.” They have not realized the ultimate truth at all, yet assume all negativities do not exist and then violate precepts in a causal or deliberate manner. This is not only unreasonable but also fatal, and creates even more negative karma.

Vimalakirti continues, the misapprehensions of permanence, bliss, self and purity are all defilements while the proper understanding of impermanence, suffering, selflessness and impurity is purity. Of course, on the ultimate level, the discriminations of permanence, bliss, self and purity, as well as impermanence, suffering, selflessness and impurity are all defilements, while the realization of the union of luminosity and emptiness is pure, which transcends the four extremes and eight fabrications.

Furthermore, grasping “I” and “mine” with conceptualization is defilement, while realizing the selflessness of both self and phenomena is purity.

“Upali, all the dharmas are generated and extinguished, without abiding⁴. Like phantasms or lightning bolts, the dharmas do not depend on each other⁵. They do not abide even for a single instant.

Usually people believe that every phenomenon goes through the procedure of generation, abiding, and extinction. For example, a person was born, stayed alive for several decades and then passed away. Actually this is just a rough observation. By employing the reasoning of the Middle Way, we will find that there is indeed no generation, no extinction, and no abiding. Or relatively speaking, generation and extinction happen at the same moment. Because of that, all phenomena are like magic illusions and lightning, they do not wait for one another and are extinguished at the same moment they are generated. No matter what the phantasm looks like humans, elephants, or anything else, it has no true existence at all. As for lightning, we never know when it appears, when it disappears, or where it goes. This metaphor describes the impermanence of all worldly phenomena such as wealth, youth, relationship, etc. Everything is impermanent. They appear but have no inherent existence. In the Tibetan and Xuanzang’s translation, there is another metaphor of floating clouds, as clouds in the sky change and float in every instant.

Instead of repeating these metaphors, we should really contemplate them and come to certain realization about the true reality of all these worldly phenomena. As Khenpo says, some friends of old days and relatives of his parent’s generation have passed away, and those alive are still hustling all around and chasing possessions and prestige. Upon seeing this, he deeply feels that all of them have no difference from a dream. Longchenpa also says, “What happened yesterday was a dream of yesterday; what will happen tomorrow is a dream of tomorrow; what happens today is a dream of now”. We should observe our life and develop a conviction of this truth.

The dharmas are all false views, like a dream, like a mirage, like the moon [reflected] in water, like an image in a mirror—[all] generated from false conceptualization.

⁴ The translation here is incorrect, which should be **all the dharmas are without production, destruction, and abiding**

⁵ The translation here is incorrect, which should be **the dharmas do not wait for one another**

All phenomena are false views because they are produced by the deluded mind, which perceives the appearance of something that does not exist at all. In true reality, all appearances are like a dream, a mirage, an image in a mirror, or the moon reflected in water. In Xuanzang's translation there is one more metaphor of the city of gandharvas. So anything that appears in this phenomenal world does not have substantial existence, including conceptual thoughts, negative karma, and so on. In the teachings of the Middle Way, there are eight or twelve metaphors of illusion which are quite helpful for us to understand the illusory nature of all phenomena.

In Han Buddhism, there is a sutra called *Sutra of Purifying Karmic Obscurations*, which is translated into Chinese around 300-400 AD. It is short but contains many teachings to explain that sins do not have intrinsic existence and are just like dreams and mirage. In the sutra there is a case of a bhikkhu named Yongshi. When he was collecting alms food in the city, a woman developed severe lovesickness of him. Her mother went to Yongshi and lied that her daughter had fallen ill because she wished to hear him preaching and urged him to see her daughter and give her teaching. Yongshi agreed. But as time went by, they became intimate and Yongshi broke the precept of not committing sexual conduct. Meanwhile, the woman's husband discovered their affair and was about to kill the bhikkhu. As the situation escalated, Yongshi instructed the woman to poison her husband and the husband died. Seeing he had broken two root precepts and remembering how pure he used to be, Yongshi was filled with remorse. He believed he was bound to hell and kept mumbling like a crazy man, "I am a sinner; I will be reborn in hell!"

Later he run into a bodhisattva who rose into the air and said to him, "I want to give you Mahayana teachings, do you believe me?" "Yes," Yongshi said, "I have great faith in you and see you as a buddha." Then the bodhisattva manifested many supernatural powers like shining in luminous light and taught him a famous stanza:

*All phenomena are like image in the mirror,
Like the moon reflected in the water,
Yet the ordinary ones perceive them with deluded and dualistic mind,
Thus ignorance, desire and hatred come into being.
In reality, all phenomena have no action and basis
And are as pure as the empty space.*

Upon hearing this stanza, the bhikkhu Yongshi, with his sharp faculty, immediately achieved the forbearance of the non-arising of dharma. The bodhisattva was a manifest of Maitreya while the bhikkhu Yongshi has now attained Buddhahood in the pure land known as Buddha Ratna-Candra.

So, for those who have broken the lay or monastic precepts, if they can encounter the Mahayana teachings of emptiness and rely on Mahayana teachers to recognize the empty nature of mental afflictions, they may achieve Buddhahood like Ratna-Candra Buddha did. Hence, if we have any transgression or defilement regarding the precepts of Pratimoksa, we should on the one hand confess sincerely by reciting Vajrasattva mantra, and on the other hand, diligently study and practice the Mahayana teachings such as emptiness and bodhichitta. In this way there will be no major karmic obstacles in our practices.

Those who understand this are called “upholders of the Vinaya.” Those who understand this are said to “understand well.”

Vimalakirti told Upali, “Those who understand that the nature of transgression is emptiness and its appearance is just like dreams and mirages are the authentic upholders of precepts, and this is the perfect understanding of observing precepts.”

The phrase “understand well” are translated as “discipline well” in the Tibetan and Xuanzang’s version. It means that if one knows the true nature of sin, then he is the best in disciplining himself. In conclusion, Vimalakirti taught those breakers of precepts to cease their anxiety because transgressions can be purified by all different dharma practices.

During the teaching, Khenpo again encourages everyone, especially young people, to study the Buddhadharma in a systematic way. Madhyamika and Buddhist Logic are very important as they explore the ultimate truth. Vinaya is another subject that deserves more attention. Monastics should know the permission and prohibition of their conducts explained in Vinaya. Lay practitioners should also study those precepts formulated for them.

Vinaya is the basis of all kinds of practices. Because of that, people at Larung Gar are required to first start with Vinaya; and after that, they will learn *Abhidharma-kosa Shastra* to master terminologies of Buddhism; next is Buddhist Logic to open one’s mind with reasoning, eloquence and wisdom; to go further, they will learn the ultimate truth of emptiness illustrated by Madhyamika, and *The Ornament of Clear Realization* which explicitly describes buddhas’

and bodhisattva's state of realization; finally, the *Guhyagarbha Tantra* is the best text to study in order to thoroughly understand the perfect union of emptiness and luminosity, such as "all phenomena are pure in nature" or "affliction is wisdom".

In all, Khenpo hopes Buddhists will not become ignorant and that a lot of knowledge can be acquired through learning and practicing. Study and practice is of great importance. We Buddhists must keep on studying and improve ourselves. If one does not study and practice and fail to understand teachings of the Buddha, then this person will inevitably ask naive questions and act funny. Of course, we do not learn Buddhist knowledge to criticize or defeat others. It would be a waste if one studies Buddhist Logic in order to win debates. Winning or losing debates is not important. Mastering the doctrines in the process is the key.

Another point is that one should never slander or reprimand anything that one does not fully understand. In terms of wisdom, our predecessors are far superior to some Buddhists today who are too liberal with their criticism. It is obvious that those who judge and slander the doctrines or the teachers in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism lack genuine insight and have more rant than reason. If they choose to debate with logic and truth, it would be acceptable but apparently they do not, just blindly tossing groundless slanders and polluting many people's mind. As Buddhists, we should also have wisdom to protect ourselves from being misguided by these slanders.

“At this two bhikkhus said, ‘such superior wisdom! Upali cannot match this! There could be no better explanation of upholding the Vinaya⁶!’”

Hearing Vimalakirti's teaching, two bhikkhus was freed of guilt and reignited hope. They praised Vimalakirti, "What wisdom you have!" In the Tibetan version, it is "This householder is extremely well endowed with wisdom. Upali is the best in observing precepts, but he cannot impart teachings like you do."

⁶ The translation here is incorrect, which should be **he who is “foremost in observing the precepts” could never speak like this!**

“I then answered, ‘excluding the Tathagata, there has never been a shravaka or bodhisattva able to command the eloquence for such a felicitous explanation - such is the brilliance of his wisdom!’

Actually Upali was a man of good nature and he was not offended at all. Although Vimalakirti spoke the truth, a lesser mind may not accept it. But Upali praised that excluding the Buddha, no other shravakas and bodhisattvas can compete with Vimalakirti in wisdom and eloquence. In the Tibetan and Xuanzang’s translation, Upali also said, “Do not entertain the notion that he is a mere householder.”

Vimalakirti challenged Upali in the presence of the two bhikkhus. Instead of being angry, Upali sincerely praised Vimalakirti. This is the response of a wise man. As Khenpo mentioned, gossiping behind or speaking insincere words is not good, and problems are best to be discussed face to face, then no one will hold grudge even though feelings may hurt at the scene.

“At the time, the doubts and [need for] repentance of the two bhikṣus were eliminated. They generated the intention to achieve anuttara samyaksambodhi, speaking this vow: ‘Let all sentient beings attain this [level of] eloquence!’ Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

At that time, the two bhikkhus’ doubts and remorse vanished and they both generated the intention to achieve Buddhahood. The Tibetan and Xuanzang’s versions also says that they paid homage to Vimalakirti and bowed to him. Normally it is not appropriate for monastics to bow to lay people. But being convinced by Vimalakirti’s wisdom and eloquence, the two bhikkhus did so. They then vowed, “Let all sentient beings attain this level of eloquence, just like you, Vimalakirti!” Therefore, Upali declined the Buddha’s request to inquire about Vimalakirti’s illness.

At the end of teaching, Khenpo encourages the audience to cross-read different versions of this sutra, like the Tibetan version, the Sanskrit version, or different English translations. In this way one will learn better.

Lecture 20

The Happiness of Studying the Vimalakirti Sutra

To begin, Khenpo shares his delight in studying the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, as it expounds the ultimate truth that all phenomena are the display of emptiness and clarity. Even though we cannot yet grasp its complete meaning, we have nonetheless experienced something approximate to it, which brings joy and ease to us all.

Such resonance is rarely found when studying scriptures on the law of cause and effect, such as the *One Hundred Stories About Karma*, *The Sutra of the Wise and the Fool*, or the *Vinayas*. We often feel heavy-hearted thinking about the retributions that will befall us sinners. On the other hand, when we're immersed in *Vimalakirti Sutra*, we learn to see the emptiness in

everything and that we ourselves are actually full of potential. Indeed, from the perspective of ultimate truth, the Buddhist philosophy is what this sutra elucidates.

As Buddhists, we need to know not only the subtle workings of causality, but also the uncommon Mahayana tenet of emptiness and clarity. Otherwise, we will disqualify ourselves as a Buddhist of thorough view and unerring practice. Many Buddhists today are inadequate in hearing and reflection of the Buddhadharmā; some, even having read more, lack the advice of a qualified teacher. Practically, the profound meaning of the Dharma is difficult to comprehend with our conceptual minds alone. Thus, it's very relevant that we're studying this sutra together under Khenpo's guidance.

Some in audiences have listened to the *Vimalakirti Sutra* before, but probably in a sporadic, fragmented fashion. Now, with a detailed and systematic approach, we will find answers to our earlier questions and broaden our way of thinking. Again, Khenpo believes knowledge acquisition is a vital constituent for a meaningful life, for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. Although everyone differs in karmic tendency and the inclination to read books fluctuates over the course of time, Khenpo asserts that a habit of studying can be cultivated, through which one will become calmer and do things in more organized way. In particular, learning the Dharma is beneficial to people at any age, which can resolve confusion in life and make daily living more meaningful.

The Buddha's Son Venerable Rahula

Previously we have covered the stories concerning Buddha's requests to his eight disciples to visit Vimalakirti; today we come to the ninth one, Rahula. Rahula is listed as one of the Sixteen Arhat Elders to whom the Buddha bid to protect the Dharma in this world and not enter nirvana. In Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo's *Brief Practice of Paying Homage and Making Offerings to the Sixteen Elders*, it says

*We pay homage to the noble elder Rahula,
Who dwells in the land of Priyangu,
Surrounded by one thousand one hundred arhats,
And holds a jewelled crown:
Grant your blessings so that the life of the teacher may be secure,
And the teachings may flourish and spread!*

Among the Buddha's great disciples, Rahula was foremost in "secret practices", but this doesn't refer to tantric practice. Rather, it means "quietly doing good", or "practicing with discretion inconspicuously." According to past masters' notes, Rahula was rather low-key, concealing his otherwise remarkable qualities. Another explanation is that when confronted with any difficulty, Rahula quietly persevered with tremendous patience, unshaken by any ordeals with his practice.

Historically Rahula is the Buddha's only son conceived before the Buddha became a monk. Kumarajiva states that on the day when Prince Siddhartha was to leave the palace, many soothsayers alerted his father King Suddhadona that if the Prince could be prevented from leaving home that night, then the following morning the Seven Jewels would appear automatically and he certainly would become a great Cakravartin King. Suddhadona then called in the most seductive courtesans to entice the Prince, who then impregnated his wife Yasodhara. This made heavenly beings in the worlds of Pure Abodes extremely sad, lamenting for helpless sentient beings; and then they magically changed the carousing courtesans into the dead persons, whose bodies decayed rapidly. The horrid scene augmented Prince Siddhartha's renunciation toward samsara; he then quickly took his Great Departure that night.

After Rahula was conceived on that fateful night, he was born six years later, at the same time when the Buddha attained enlightenment in Bodhgaya. Yashodhara's pregnancy last for six years, instead of the normal ten-month's time. Thus, questions were raised about the identity of Rahula's father and about Yasodhara's purity. In order to prove her innocence as well as her son's legitimacy, Yasodhara threw the infant into a lotus lake and solemnly declared, "If the baby is the Buddha's son, let him float!" Immediately Rahula floated up and did not sink.

In Kumarajiva's account it tells that when the Buddha undertook six years' austerities near the bank of Niranjana River, Yasodhara emulated him in a cold corner of the palace, thinking that although she could not be with the Buddha, she aspired to shun from the ostentatious lifestyle of the palace and endure the trials of an ascetic. Later after Rahula was born, since he looked quite similar to Prince Siddhartha, King Suddhadona accepted him as his grandson.

The name *Rahula* literally means "little Rahu". Rahu is a demon formerly believed to obstruct the sun and the moon, causing eclipses. One interpretation says that Rahula received his name in accordance with a lunar eclipse coincided with his birth. Another interpretation says that since Rahula was conceived on the day of Prince Siddhartha's renunciation, and is therefore

named Rahula, indicating a fetter on the path to enlightenment. Others notice that the extraordinary six years' gestation matches with the six years' harsh mortification the Buddha underwent and this delayed birth is an obstruction caused by his previous negative karmas, hence the name "Rahula". Still, some say "Rahula" has a meaning of "the head of naga".

When the Buddha first returned to his hometown, Rahula was ordained as a novice monk to enter the order. He was then nine years old as noted in *Forest of Gems in the Garden of the Dharma*, or seven according to others. In either case, he is the first novice monk and is a prominent figure among the sramaneras.

Some people may doubt why the Buddha manifested a lifestyle of having a wife and fathering a son before his monkhood. As explained in the scriptures, this part of life that complies with worldly convention has a profound implicit meaning. If it were missing, people could not relate to the Buddha well and would generate wrong opinions, such as, "The Buddha didn't know what pleasure is all about, and he lacked sufficient ability to live a decent worldly life and had to become an ascetic." To offset this misconception, the Buddha showed that he could indeed enjoy pleasures of the world but later he taught that there's no need to become attached to them. Thus the Buddha manifested the twelve deeds of his life, and among them, "delighting in the company of his wife and consorts in his father's palace" is the fifth one.

Rahula's dialogue with Vimalakirti

The Buddha told Rahula, "You go inquire about Vimalakirti's illness."

Rahula addressed the Buddha, "World-honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why?"

"I remember once in the past, the elders' sons of Vaisali came to where I was, bowed their heads to me in reverence, and asked, 'O Rahula, you are the son of the Buddha, who forsook the position of universal ruler (*cakravartin*) and left home for the path (i.e., enlightenment). What benefits are there to leaving home?"

The sons of prestigious townspeople in the big city of Vaisali came to Rahula's place and asked him, "Venerable Rahula, being a son of the Buddha, you forsook the position of universal ruler and became a monk. What's the benefits of getting ordained?" A *cakravartin* king, literally translated as a wheel-turning king, is an ideal king who rules all of the great continents with

peace. According to scriptures such as *Ornament of the Mahayana Sutra*, they have four kinds: gold, silver, copper, and iron, which indicates a wheel-turning king's rank, or the extent of his realm and power. Should the Buddha have chosen to remain in the secular world, he would become a gold-wheel-turning sage king, the foremost among the four rulers. Rahula, similarly, was highly endowed with merit and would become an iron-wheel-turning king. However, he also renounced the worldly life of pomp and glory for the sake of liberation. Thus, the elders' sons of Vaisali wondered, "What benefits are there to leaving home?"

Khenpo himself has met this kind of inquiry quite often. When he is in public places away from the monastery, be it riding a bus, drinking tea, or having meals, often someone will approach and ask him: "You are a monk, right? What good is it to become a monk? Is it tough to live an ordained life? Are you surviving okay? It is pitiful to be a monastic, isn't it?" Obviously, a monastic is not the norm of the world, so no wonder people are curious and inquisitive when they meet one. Khenpo says wryly that ordained monks and nuns could copy Rahula's answer when being asked a similar question.

"I then explained to them, according to the Dharma, the benefits of the merits of leaving home. At that point Vimalakirti came and said to me,

Rahula then explained to them the virtue of living an ordained life according to the view of the Shravakayana. Indeed, entering the monastic order and remaining long ordained incurs innumerable merit. There are many metaphors in the scriptures describing the benefits of being ordained, such as that an ordained life is like living in a cool and breezy room, whereas secular life is like residing in a burning iron chamber, and so on. The *King of Samadhi Sutra* states that the merit of observing monastic vows in degenerate times, even for one day, is far greater than that of offering seven treasures of the whole world to buddhas and bodhisattvas. Thus, even to live one day as a monk or a nun amasses vast benefit.

A story in the *Sutra of Salient Points Collection* gives an example: Once there was a queen whom the king adored dearest among his entire harem. Not only was her beauty incomparable, but also was her art in singing and dancing most exquisite. One day, while she was reveling in performing, a fortune-teller apt in physiognomy saw the king's favorite queen had only seven more days to live.

Knowing the imminent demise of his beloved queen, the king became very upset and couldn't help groaning. When the queen noticed, she asked: "Lord, why are you unhappy? Did I not

dance beautifully today?” The king kept silent but later had to tell her the truth when she pressed for an answer. Hearing her doomed fate, however, the queen maintained her composure.

She recalled having heard from a nun that by observing monastic vows for one day, a person at death will be spared from lower rebirth and is reborn in celestial realms. She told the king, and after discussion they decided to enjoy life together for the first six days, then, on the seventh she would take the monastic vow.

On the last day of her life, the queen, having performed ablution, received the eight precepts of fasting and purification, which was followed by receiving monastic ordination. She soon died from food poisoning. Before she drew her last breath, the moaning king asked her to send him a message should she take rebirth in the celestial realm, which would put his mind at peace.

The queen indeed was reborn in heavenly realm; she kept her promise and appeared in the palace as a goddess, with her radiance shining forth in every direction. The king was not prepared for this splendid scene and could only mutter, “Who could have come to this place?” The goddess answered: “I used to be your queen who died recently.” The king’s love for her rushed back and he wanted to hug her, but to no avail. Later, the king became disillusioned about worldly affairs and entered monastic order for good.

This account may sound like a fairy tale, but it’s a story told by ancient sages. Before we attain the power to fathom the unfathomable, such as reincarnation and the work of the karmic law, we shall keep our mind open and reflect on the story’s deep meaning, which will bring benefit to our practice.

In the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*, Nagarjuna explicates the difference between merits gained by ordination and the lack of it. “Despite its splendid body, the peacock cannot fly as far as the swan. In the same way, the layman, despite his wealth and nobility, is not the equal of the monk whose qualities are eminent.” With its iridescent plumage, the peacock is stunning and magnificent, yet it can’t fly very far or high as the swan goose can. Householders, with their wealth and prosperity, may appear to have it all, but they are poor in merit when compared with those of ordained monastics.

However, the decision to enter the monastic order can never be an easy one. Some people may think that an ordained life is much easier than a secular life, as there is no work pressure or social anxiety. Or some others may carelessly decide to receive ordination as they cannot bear

an inharmonious relationship anymore, or they just feel depressed and hopeless with their worldly life. Actually, all of these cannot be counted as an authentic renunciation. As taught in the Vinaya, such motivations of getting ordained will not be accepted by the Buddha, because they are not stable, and when the outer circumstances become better, these people may want to again abandon their monastic robes and go back to their secular life.

About ten years ago, Khenpo interviewed a number of monks and nuns, most of whom had academic backgrounds, asking what prompted them to embark on such a path and come to Larung Gar. He learned they might start as non-believers living a comfortable life; later, it could be a book, a teacher, or some chance encounter that kindled in them an interest and conviction in the Dharma, which, though fickle early on, gained momentum and became a calling for a monastic life. They recalled their intense inner and outer struggles as they tried to sever their worldly ties—work, family, personal relations, responsibilities, and whatnots—for high spiritual advancement. The book “Sprays of the Sea of Wisdom” is the compilation of their accounts. Readers of this book will come to see that every monastic has sacrificed a lot in their quest for truth, and their stories are compelling.

“O Rahula, you should not explain the benefits of the merits of leaving home. Why? To be without benefit and without merits—this is leaving home. One may explain that there are benefits and merits in the conditioned *dharmas*, but leaving home is an unconditioned *dharma* and there are no benefits and merits in unconditioned *dharmas*.”

Vimalakirti approached and said, “Reverent Rahula, you should not proclaim the merits gained by leaving home. Why? Renunciation is itself the very absence of virtues and benefits.” Here Vimalakirti asserts the virtues of leaving home from the perspective of the unconditioned, or ultimate truth. That is, only in regard to conditioned things one may speak of benefit and virtues; however, renunciation is unconditioned, so there is no such a thing as merit or benefit.

As to the difference between conditioned and unconditioned phenomena, *Abhidharma-kosha-shastra* states that a phenomenon existing in a mode of generation, abiding, and cessation is a conditioned phenomenon; and its opposite, unconditioned. Unconditioned phenomena are said to have three categories of empty space, analytical cessations, and non-analytical cessations. Or in other teachings it entails eight kinds including unconditioned suchness. Given the context of Mahayana or Hinayana, Abhidharma has different views in this regard.

Vimalakirti is switching between the two levels of truth, relative truth and ultimate truth. Relatively speaking, leaving home is a virtuous act and certainly brings incredible merit. Ultimately speaking, however, there is no such a thing truly existing. We must be careful not to mix up these two, lest we be liable to think that since nothing exists ultimately, then all meritorious activities amount to nothing either. This view is mistaken. In relative truth, merit is very much at play and we must be scrupulous about it. In ultimate truth, we may say that merit or virtue possesses no intrinsic nature at all.

A Compendium of the Five Lamps depicts the first meeting between the Chan Patriarch Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu of Liang Dynasty. As the Emperor had been a fervent patron of Buddhism, he asked Bodhidharma, “How much merit have I earned for ordaining Buddhist monks, building monasteries, having sutras copied, and commissioning Buddha images?” Bodhidharma replied curtly: “None.” The pompous emperor was deflated. Bodhidharma, seeing there was no rapport between the two of them, went to Shaolin Monastery and meditated there in a small cave for nine years.

In fact, Bodhidharma’s answer of “no merit” was given from the aspect of ultimate truth that nothing has intrinsic existence. However, this does not mean positive acts such as translating sutras or erecting temples bear no positive karma in terms of relative truth. During Emperor Wu’s era, Mahayana Buddhism was newly introduced to China and the profound view of emptiness had not been established. That’s why Bodhidharma’s answer seemed so baffling or even unwelcome to the Emperor and his contemporaries, which remains to be the case for many people nowadays. The crux of the matter is that, in terms of ultimate truth, nothing truly exists and all phenomena are empty; yet, in terms of relative truth, phenomena still arise dependently from causes and conditions in an unceasing manner, they are not “void”. We should not confound the domains of these two truths. As Mipham Rinpoche says in his writings on the Middle Way, some statements are refuted on both the relative and ultimate level, while some statements are only refuted on the ultimate level, and have to be admitted on the relative level.

What does renunciation, or leaving home mean? Typically, “leaving home” connotes the acts of walking out of one’s home, having hair shaved and putting on a monastic robe. However, what we are discussing here has a different meaning that transcends mere outward signs. According to Master Kuiji, the above is an analysis made from the perspective of being conditioned or unconditioned, and following that, Vimalakirti explains it further from the Mahayana’s point of view.

“Rahula, to leave home is to be without that and this, and without intermediate. It is to transcend the sixty-two views and be located in nirvana.

Vimalakirti continued: “To leave home is not this side, i.e., samsara, not that side, i.e., nirvana, nor those in between. We commonly deem “leaving home” as leaving “the home of samsara” and heading for nirvana, the “peaceful cessation”. Here Vimalakirti refers it to a state transcending both samsara and nirvana that abides in an unfabricated, natural state. This is the genuine meaning of “leaving home”.

Furthermore, leaving home means abandoning the sixty-two wrong views such as externalism and nihilism, and abiding in the indestructible natural state of nirvana. In Xuanzang’s translation, instead of the sixty-two views, “various views” are mentioned. In the Tibetan version, it says renunciation is the transcendence of all eternalist and nihilist beliefs; it is not material but is free of matter. “Material” refers to all characteristics, and “free of material” refers to the conceptual mind.

In all these translations, renunciation denotes the eradication of all kinds of views and resting in the natural state of nirvana. In the *Ornament of Realization*, “nirvana” can be explained in various ways, for instance, the truth of all phenomena, or the passing away manifested by the buddhas. The “nirvana” here refers to the ultimate state as it truly is.

“[Leaving home] is accepted by the wise and practiced by the sagely.

From ancient times onward, all buddhas including the thousand ones of this Good Kalpa observed monastic vows and attained buddhahood as monks. Sages including the Buddha held the form of ordination that was free from all trappings; and bodhisattvas in ten directions always extolled the merit of monastics.

In some Theravada Buddhist countries, it’s required by law that one child per family be ordained, which brings honor to the parents. Conversely, should their monastic offspring disrobe, it will cause the parents much distress. In Han China today, surprisingly some parents support their children to be ordained. Khenpo hears that certain parents have already prepared the monastic robes of novice monk for their children who are barely one or two years old. In such cases, Khenpo tries to cool them down a bit for them to not make hasty decisions. What if when these children, when growing up, only want to disown the monastic life their parents imposed upon them earlier? It would be quite a dilemma to resolve.

In countries such as Korea, Japan, Burma, and Laos, many young children become novice monks. We are not sure about their training in terms of study and practice, but at least they look serene. Khenpo believes that the monastic training and education received at a tender age will make indelible marks in their mind streams. Whether they go on to become a fully ordained monk or not, the seed of liberation planted in them will kick off a great start for their future lives.

Thus, due to different historical and cultural backgrounds, people in some areas think highly of the monastics whereas others detest encountering them. Khenpo has personally met people with friendly expressions or hostile frowns. However, in the Tibetan area, monastics are generally well respected and are considered auspicious symbols.

For sure, among the monastic community there are bad apples. But the misconduct of a single monastic is in no way the representation of all. If faith and devotion toward the ordained were overturned by one monastic disgrace, it would be irrational and thoughtless. In a secular setting, similarly, it would be senseless to topple trust in all government officials simply because of the corrupt deed of one official.

Human beings by nature are complicated creatures, and individuals vary in their own dispositions and life's experiences. A monastic gains merit when taking ordination, and, in the same vein, is at fault when disrobing or violating vows. In the latter case, the offender may be confessing seriously and shamefully, which we are not aware of. Hence, we shall not criticize others subjectively and hastily. Some front-page scandals of monks, nuns, or great masters may be true or may be false; regardless, they cannot precisely represent that person's overall character.

It subjugates the host of Maras and [allows one to] transcend the five destinations, purify the five eyes, attain the five powers, and establish the five faculties. It is to be without vexation over “that,” to transcend the host of heterogeneous evils, and to demolish the heterodox paths.

Leaving home for the path of enlightenment subjugates the maras of dualism, craving, delusion, and other defilements; conquers obstacles; transcends the five realms of existence (asura and god realms counted as one); purifies the five eyes; attains the five powers; and cultivates the five spiritual faculties.

Leaving home is not to harm any sentient being. Monastics must strive to maintain purity in mind and conduct at minimum, never harm any sentient beings nor harbor evil intentions to hurt others. It is understandable that foul moods may arise even in those donning monastic robes, since habitual afflictions of ordinary people are hard to get rid of. Nonetheless, to maintain perverted and belligerent thoughts tenaciously is unthinkable for a monastic; it would be better to forget about taking ordinations in the first place.

A monastic life can cut off all kinds of evil intent and wicked conduct, and demolishes the heterodox paths. “Demolish” here doesn’t mean to suppress by force; rather, it is like when the sun arises, darkness is naturally dispelled, as described by Master Kuiji. Aryadeva says in the *Four Hundred Stanzas on the Middle Way*:

*This principle is not taught,
By Tathagatas for the sake of debate,
Yet it burns up others’ contentions,
As fire does its fuel.*

Although it is not the Buddha’s intention to abolish the heterodox, yet when the Buddha is preaching, the heterodox paths are naturally dismantled. When truth unfolds, its power is such that the untrue path will collapse on its own; much like when wildfire is spreading, all the trees in its path are incinerated as a matter of course.

Khenpo quotes further from the *Introduction to the Middle Way*:

*The arguments contained within our treatise were not contrived through love of disputation.
They set forth suchness only for the sake of freedom.
They are not to be blamed if, while expounding emptiness,
They show the falseness of discordant doctrines.*

That is to say, many avenues of investigation are presented in the Middle Way, which is not argument for argument’s sake; rather, it serves to reveal truth for the sake of liberation. In the process of establishing truth from one’s own viewpoints, it becomes necessary to refute and demolish the opponent’s view; such a measure is free from fault and blame. Khenpo cautions the audiences not misconstrue the meaning by thinking that non-Buddhist traditions are to be annihilated. The fact of the matter is that when truth prevails, doctrines that run counter to it naturally meet their demise.

It is to transcend provisional names and emerge from the muck [of samsara]. It is to be without attachments, without any sense of personal possession. It is to be without experience, without turmoil. It is to harbor joy within and defend the intentions of others. It is to accord with meditation and transcend the host of transgressions. If one can be like this, then this is true leaving home.'

True renunciation transcends labels and names, all of which are given provisionally based on causes and conditions, and thus are destined to extinguish in due course. True renunciation is the emergence from the muck of samsara, like a lotus flower emerging from the deep mud without becoming sullied. To lay people, "muck" connotes craving and desire; while to the monastics, it means wrong views. True renunciation is free from covetousness. In *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels*, it says:

*Even if you are not being tonsured,
(Realizing the ultimate truth of no self and no phenomenon,
You are thus getting the real ordination.*

Khenpo encourages the audiences to look up the meaning of "truly renouncing the world" in Volume 104 of this sutra. According to the Shravakayana, the proper deportment of ordained monks stipulates having shaved hair, putting on robes, and carrying oneself with dignity and humility. Whereas in Mahayana the standard is different in that genuine renunciation entails forsaking attachment.

"Without any sense of personal possession" means being free from the concept of "I" and "mine". "Without experience" means that renunciation wipes out grasping, which includes grasping of lust, grasping of rites and rituals, and grasping of wrong views. "Without turmoil" means no distractions, which includes distraction by marks, distraction by discrimination, internal distraction, and external distraction. Genuine renunciation is free from all these distractions.

Renunciation generates joy of seeking liberation and the truth; it also defends the intentions of others. The Tibetan and Xuanzang's translations use slightly different words of "skilled in disciplining one's own mind and protecting others' minds." This sounds similar to the teaching of His Holiness Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche, "Do not lose your own path. Do not disturb others' minds."

Renunciation also means to dwell in mental quiescence and to guard against all wrongs of the world. If one can be like this, then this is the true renunciation of leaving home. Vimalakirti here explains in detail his version on the true meaning of “leaving home”. The *Sutra of The Collection of All Virtues* states:

*Though not taking the vow of individual liberation,
Always with one’s mind be detached from all evils,
And abide in the state of meditation, wisdom, and virtues,
Such is what authentic renunciation implies.*

Even without taking Pratimoksha vows, if one’s mind harbors no evil thoughts and is imbued with wisdom, meditative quiescence and virtues, this, then, is genuine renunciation. This sutra together with *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* mentioned above expounds extensively on the meaning of genuine renunciation.

In sum, the genuine state of renunciation involves having a mind abiding constantly in wisdom and meditation, unsullied by mental afflictions. Some people may elaborate along this line: “If what really matters is keeping a pure mind, then why bother with the external sign of wearing robes?” And, “My loved one doesn’t need to become a monastic, as long as they have a pure mind and study the Dharma diligently, it’s equal to being ordained.” Khenpo jokes that their views are quite similar to Vimalakirti’s, probably indicating they’ve reached the spiritual level Vimalakirti has. In fact, they utter this words only out of selfishness, far away from the ultimate truth explained in Mahayana, because they don’t want their children to leave them and become monks or nuns.

Having learned these teachings, in daily life we shall maintain a pleasant and easy-going spirit imperturbable by trivial matters; even when facing setbacks, we stay unfazed as much as we can. The biographies of many great masters demonstrate that in whatever situation, be it something ordinary or catastrophic, they always remain calm and unruffled. On the other hand, worldly people, incapable of reining their afflictions such as hatred and jealousy, are powerless to extricate themselves from the depth of suffering.

Today, many people appear to achieve both success and fame, but few are genuinely happy. Spiritual seekers, in comparison, fare much better in this regard. Through training, seasoned practitioners are not troubled by any disturbance coming along their way, nor are they gripped by clinging.

Thus, it is important to “discipline one’s own mind”, or to “purify one’s mind” as taught by the Buddha. Khenpo hopes that we will internalize today’s teaching and tame our unruly mind, making it less susceptible to irritation. Nor should we allow our mind to be as capricious as the weather in some Tibetan areas, where one moment it’s bright and breezy, and the next moment it’s dark with thick clouds, with thunder, lightning and hail.

Khenpo notices that the little sparrows in his yard are very sensitive to weather changes. When it’s sunny, the sparrows hop around and chirp cheerfully; when it looks ominous with dark clouds rolling in, one head sparrow will cry out loud to alert the others and the pack will start to seek shelter from the rain or hail.

Human beings are also sensitive to and affected by the “mood weather” of others. For instance, in an office when the boss is in a lousy mood, the inferiors will feel ill at ease. Cautiously, they try to move around quietly or hold their tongues lest they will make things worse. This is not a healthy situation. Here Vimalakirti teaches one should defend the intentions of others. That is, we should be thoughtful about others’ needs, wants, and preferences. Khenpo considers this a very crucial training for the mind.

“At this Vimalakirti said to those elders’ sons, ‘You would do well to leave home together in the correct Dharma. Why? It is difficult to encounter a time when a buddha is in the world.’

Vimalakirti encouraged those young men to leave home and he listed three reasons, as detailed in both the Tibetan and Xuangzang’s translations: First, the appearance of the Buddha in the world is extremely rare; second, it’s difficult to obtain a human body; third, to be endowed with leisure and opportunity conducive to Dharma study is very precious. In Kumarajiva’s translation, it presents only the first. Notwithstanding one or three reasons, Khenpo believes that anyone who not only has obtained a human body but also has become a monastic is extremely fortunate. Because who knows if getting a human body is your lot the next time around?

Despite the fact that ordination begets great merit and the tonsuring ceremony often brings tears to the newly initiated, Khenpo cautions the audience to be prudent when deciding on this path. Never act impulsively or submit to other’s persuasion. Everyone needs to establish one’s own idea; and only when a decision is made conscientiously will it remain unshakable.

“The elders’ sons said, ‘O retired scholar, we have heard that the Buddha has said one may not leave home without first receiving permission from one’s parents.’

“Vimalakirti said, ‘So it is. You should immediately generate the intention to achieve anuttara samyaksambodhi, and this is to “leave home.” This is sufficient.’

The elders’ sons responded that one could not receive ordination without the permission of one’s parents. Vimalakirti replies, “Yes, it is so. However, the moment you set your mind on attaining supreme enlightenment, it is the same as leaving home, the same as taking monastic vows.”

The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels states: “A bodhisattva who receives true ordination is the one who has been free from all characteristics, and who willingly enters into the three realms of samsara to bring all beings to the path of liberation. Thus can it be called as the true ordination.” Here it teaches the true ordination of bodhisattvas: First, to hold a view free from any characteristic, which is the view of the emptiness of all phenomena; second, to dwell in the three realms without forsaking the mundane world; third, to mature beings spiritually and to bring about benefit to them. Only having fulfilled these three conditions can one then claim to have received true ordination.

Therefore, try not to narrowly define or interpret the meaning of “renouncing the world to take ordination.” A merely outer appearance of a shaved head and robes does not make a monastic, nor should one seek out a monastic life in order to run away from secular problems. Actually, in all Buddhist paths, authentic monastic members are those who can shoulder the responsibility of propagating the Buddha’s legacy. And in so doing, first they need to gain a realization of emptiness or at least to have an experiential understanding of the Dharma; second, they should not fancy a leisurely life behind monastery walls; rather, they must walk into all kinds of social settings to guide and benefit beings. Khenpo gives an example: Supposing there were three thousand monastics who endeavored in offering spiritual or material assistance to others. If they succeeded in helping three thousand people, then the seed of virtue would have been planted in the mind streams of these people, who later on might even enter the monastic path to benefit others.

Similarly, if each of you in the audience will study the doctrine of emptiness and strive to bring a positive impact to society, then you are in possession of the precious bodhichitta of Mahayana.

In this way, you have accomplished “leaving home” genuinely. It doesn’t matter if you enter monastic order or not, and in either case, you have a true renunciation.

Khenpo thinks this is also what Vimalakirti is trying to say in the end. In a relative sense, to become a fully ordained monk or nun and adhere to the Pratimoksha vows is a significant milestone on Buddhist path. However, from the perspective of ultimate reality, one needs not regret the lack of cause and conditions for entering the monastic order formally. Because as long as one is able to perfect the points mentioned above, namely, to dwell in emptiness that is free from characteristics, to dive fearlessly into the thick of samsara, and to bring benefit and liberation to beings, then one has achieved the genuine “leaving home and taking ordination.”

Khenpo encourages the audience to reflect deeply on this teaching and the quote from *The Sutra of the Heap of Jewels*. Although you may lead a typical life with children and a spouse, if you constantly think about benefiting beings and study diligently the doctrine of emptiness, then you are not too far from the state of “renunciation” expounded in this sutra.

More importantly, we must put into action our bodhichitta intention. That is, we shall exert ourselves to actually help others. Even if we are not able to do anything physically, we can at least generate a kind heart toward others. Harboring an altruistic heart alone is rare and commendable; and we’ll be surprised at how much we can actually accomplish when our potential is unraveled by an altruistic mind. In all, altruism is what really counts. Without it, even receiving ordination is merely superficial.

There is a story in *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*: Two Indian monks who had the qualities of full training presented themselves before Venerable Atisa. When Atisa explained to them the emptiness according to Prajnaparamita, they were terrified and, blocking their ears, quickly ran away. Atisa was saddened and said, “Unless one has laid a solid foundation of listening to and contemplating on the profound teachings, observing pure vows alone will lead one to nowhere.” Khenpo notices many nuns try to uphold the Pratimoksha vows in meticulous detail, which is rather commendable. However, if one becomes too rigid and dogmatic, one’s ability to benefit others may be compromised.

In the ordination procedures in Vinaya, one needs to get prior parental consent. In the past, when the Buddha visited his hometown for the first time after he attained Buddhahood, the Buddha had his son Rahula ordained by Shariputra. King Suddhodana was upset with this outcome, for Rahula was the next royal prince in line. He said: “When the Lord renounced the

world it was a cause of great pain to me. It was with deep sadness that I watched Ananda renounce the world. But it is especially painful when little Rahula renounces. So, I ask that the noble ones will not ordain sons without permission from their parents!” Thus, out of respect for his father the Buddha agreed to this request and made it a discipline in the Vinaya. But if the Acharya who gives the ordination fails to observe this discipline, it will be just a minor fault which can be purified on semimonthly uposatha.

“Then thirty-two elders’ sons all generated the intention to achieve anuttara samyaksambodhi. Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

At that time, all the thirty-two elders’ sons developed the intention to achieve the unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. This is why Rahula was not qualified to call on Vimalakirti and inquire about his illness.

Lecture 21

The *Vimalakirti Sutra* is one of the most important and inspiring Mahayana sutras; studying it is very beneficial to this and future lives. Nagarjuna says in his *Hundred Verses on Wisdom*:

Wisdom is the root of all good qualities,

Seen and not yet seen.

To achieve both of these,

Embrace wisdom.

Meaning, all excellent qualities of the present and remote future are derived from wisdom, which is gained by listening to and reflecting on the Dharma. Few individuals can retain all their wisdom from previous lives and recall it when prompted, such as receiving some specific instructions. Most people cannot retrieve lost wisdom due to the trauma of entering a womb, and they have to endeavor in Dharma studies to cultivate wisdom anew.

In the process of learning Dharma, it’s paramount to establish a correct view under authentic guidance at the outset; otherwise progress will be impeded. The *Surangama Sutra* states: “An incorrect cause will lead to a distorted result.” Any project commenced without a right goal will get a faulty outcome. Khenpo advises the audience to devote time daily on genuine Dharma study and contemplation, and avoid perfunctory activities that waste time. The persistent study

of the Dharma can bring benefits to this and future lives. Otherwise, even if one claims oneself to be a Buddhist for many years, one would still have no idea about the view, practice, and conduct in Buddhism, and what he knows about Buddhism could be just some rituals, formalities, or a fake version of Buddhism.

In studying of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, on the one hand we should investigate it with a researcher's discipline and, on the other hand, we embrace it with a Buddhist's heart of faith and devotion. Only so will the profundity of this sutra be revealed. Otherwise, a rigid analysis alone will not allow glimpses of its inner rich domain of religion. Conversely, a general understanding in the dimension of faith will not render a full grasp of its solid logic basis, the exact meaning of each sentence, as well as the insights of different versions. Thus, Khenpo advises us to cross-reference these two approaches in receiving the teachings on this sutra.

Who is Ananda?

Previously we covered the episodes relating to nine of Buddha's principal disciples—Shariputra, Maudgalyayana, Mahakasyapa, Subhuti, Purna, Katyayana, Aniruddha, Upali, and Rahula. Today, it's Ananda's turn.

At that time, all the above-mentioned nine disciples had reached arhathood; Ananda, however, had not attained the same status until after Buddha's parinirvana. Among the Buddha's disciples, Ananda was foremost in hearing the Buddha's teachings and had the best memory of them. Indeed, it is due to Ananda's previous aspiration that he became most learned in the *Tripitakas*, not only in this life but also in all other lifetimes. Ananda was ordained at the age of eight; later he became Buddha's personal attendant and served him devoutly for thirty-one years. He was at Buddha's side when the Buddha passed into parinirvana.

The word *ananda* literally means "great delight, bliss". It is said that Ananda was born on the day of Buddha's enlightenment, and he earned the name to commemorate the great rejoicing in the city. Alternatively, the name implies that people were pleased at the sight of Ananda since he was very good-looking, with a face that glowed like the full moon and eyes like blue lotus flowers. Khenpo comments that it is past karma that determines how one looks in this life. Someone may be blessed with an attractive face that delights everyone; other faces will either please or displease certain people; while some faces are simply repulsive to all.

In the *Lotus Sutra*, Buddha said: “When Ananda and I were at the place of Void King Buddha, we both at the same time conceived the determination to attain supreme and perfect enlightenment. Ananda constantly delighted in wide knowledge of the Dharma, I constantly put forth diligent effort. Therefore I have already succeeded in attaining buddhahood, while Ananda guards and upholds my teachings. And he will likewise guard the Dharma of the Buddha of future existences and will teach, convert, and bring success to the multitude of bodhisattvas.”

From this account we can conclude that it’s crucial to practice the Dharma diligently. People may value erudition highly, but without putting knowledge into assiduous practice, spiritual accomplishment is beyond reach. In Ananda’s case, when the Buddha attained enlightenment, Ananda was still an ordinary attendant, and reached arhathood only after the Buddha had passed away.

Thus, whether you attain achievement or not depends heavily on your effort. At Larung Gar, for example, someone of lesser acumen but extraordinary diligence can become an excellent practitioner and received a high monastic degree, while someone with exceptional intelligence but only a little diligence ends up retrogressing in their Dharma practices.

In ultimate reality there is no high or low, good or bad; but in relative reality, persistence makes a huge difference. It was because the Buddha had constantly put forth diligent effort in studying and practicing that he attained fruition swiftly. In the same way, we must persevere in our spiritual pursuits, yielding not easily to obstacles such as foul moods, poor health, busy worldly involvement, or other excuses.

In a verse Mipham Rinpoche advises practitioners to train in joyful perseverance and never succumb to setbacks during study and practice, and by doing so, Manjushri’s wisdom blessing will continuously come forth and favorable circumstances multiply.

Is there anyone who has never met difficulties in life? None. Even many widely regarded Dharma masters are no strangers to unending adversity and hindrance during their practice and benefiting others. However, with sheer determination, they eventually perfected their qualities and activities.

This unyielding spirit is also a virtue many Western scientists and statesmen adhere to in their quest for success. In public speeches, they extol time again the element of resilience and grit

when facing impediments. During inauguration ceremonies, some presidents even take an oath of not giving up on worthy endeavors.

Ananda's Dialogue with Vimalakirti

The Buddha told Ananda, “You go inquire about Vimalakirti’s illness.”

Ananda addressed the Buddha, “World-Honored One, I dare not accept your instruction to go inquire about his illness. Why? I remember once in the past, the World-Honored One had a slight illness requiring cow’s milk [as medicine]. I took my bowl and proceeded to the gateway of a great brahman home.

Ananda recalled that once in the past, the Buddha had a slight illness, so he went out to beg for milk alms as the medicine for the Buddha. According to traditional Tibetan medicine, illnesses are primarily caused by three kinds of imbalance—of wind, of bile, and of phlegm. Some commentaries note that the disease the Buddha had could be a wind disorder, for which cow’s milk is commonly indicated as treatment; the milk of a sheep, horse, or camel will also do.

Actually, the Buddha’s illness is a purposeful display for teaching. As the *Sutra of the Heap of Jewels* says: “In order to make sentient beings acknowledge the suffering of illness, the Buddha manifested various illnesses such as a backache.” Now, if the vajra body of the Buddha could still be inflicted by illness, nothing needs to be said about our mortal bodies.

Indeed, great masters often show signs of illness at the end of their lives. It would be foolish for disciples to lose faith in their gurus as a result. Rather, we generate pure perception and think: “Even the bodies of great siddhas and sublime masters can take ill, so how could my own ordinary body be an exception? This body is nothing to rely on.” Thus our renunciation to samsara and determination to practice the Dharma become even more fervent. Therefore, it is of special meaning that eminent masters appear to be sick.

The story on Ananda getting milk for the Buddha appears in the *Sutra of Milk Light Buddha* in the Chinese *Tripitaka*, and also recorded in *The Guidance on Reading the Tripitaka* by the Buddhist Master Ouyi of late Ming Dynasty. In the following Khenpo gives a brief summary from the sutra.

Because of Buddha's illness, Ananda took his begging bowl and went to the house of a prominent Brahman, waiting for milk alms at the gate. This Brahman came from a wealthy family of prestigious status and kept a retinue of fifty thousand. However, being extremely stingy, he never gave out anything and even had his yard covered with nets to prevent birds from coming to peck at grains.

When the Brahman saw Ananda on alms round at his mansion, he found himself in a dilemma. Should he refuse to offer alms to Ananda, he would be ridiculed for miserliness; should he make the offering, he would be accused of serving Gautama Buddha by his disciples. Racking his brain, the Brahman came up with a clever idea: Why not send Ananda off to get milk himself from an unruly cow? The cow would certainly thwart Ananda's attempt or even injure and kill him.

Consequently, the five hundred brahmins who were relying on that Brahman as his disciples made fun of Ananda, abusing him verbally: "Hasn't the Buddha proclaimed that 'I am chief of the world, foremost am I in the world?' If this teacher of yours cannot even cure his own sicknesses and needs milk, how can he be the savior of all beings' sufferings?"

At that juncture, Vimalakirti suddenly appeared and told Ananda sternly: "You must leave this place immediately, or you invite insults! Get going, quickly!" Hearing this, Ananda was bewildered: "Now that both the brahmins and the Elder Vimalakirti are saying discouraging words to me. Am I wrong? I've been following the Buddha as my teacher for a long time. Do I not comprehend his intent? Did I misunderstand him? Should I give up begging for milk all together?"

Then he heard a voice coming from the sky: "What the Elder Vimalakirti said was true. Nonetheless, you go ahead and fetch the milk. It is for the benefits of beings that the Buddha appears to be sick, and getting milk still serves a purpose." Being so consoled, Ananda hesitated no more and went ahead to get milk.

Ananda arrived at the farm and approached the supposedly very aggressive cow. But instead of acting wildly or trampling this strange monk, the cow showed great respect to Ananda and said in a human voice: "If my milk can help the Buddha, by all means please take it freely." Her calf also knelt down before Ananda gladly and said: "I am most happy to offer my milk from my mother to the Buddha. I will have grass and water instead." So Ananda got milk smoothly and brought it back to the Buddha.

The Buddha later prophesied that the cow would become a monk and quickly achieve arhathood in front of the future Buddha Maitreya, and the calf would later become the Milk Light Buddha. The *Sutra of Milk Light Buddha*, named after this buddha, details the exchanges between Ananda and Vimalakirti.

The story above again is a display of the Buddha's magical powers. Khenpo stresses the attitude of being open-minded to the possibility of a reality beyond concept and ordinary perceptions. To this end, we must forsake our habitual tendencies and arrogance, especially among those who hold high academic degrees from elite universities or who are accomplished in the worldly sense. It's true they may be experts in specific fields, but in terms of the inconceivable truth, the wisdom they have developed is rather insignificant. Thus it's best to maintain an attitude of humility, respect, joy, fairness, and objectivity in front of the ultimate truth.

“While I was standing there Vimalakirti came and said to me, ‘O Ananda, why are you standing here with your bowl so early in the morning?’

“I said, ‘O retired scholar, the World-Honored One has a slight illness requiring cow's milk, and so I have come here.’

“Vimalakirti said, ‘Stop, stop, Ananda! Do not speak thus. The Tathagata's body is the essence of vajra. [In it] the evils are already eradicated and the host of goods universally assembled. What illness could it have, what vexation could there be?

In ancient India, monastics follow the Vinaya rule to eat only one meal a day at noontime, when they are out for alms round. So it's a bit out of place when Ananda went for alms very early in the morning. After hearing Ananda's purpose of begging for milk, Vimalakirti commanded that Ananda stop speaking those words. Then he explained why in two aspects.

First, the Buddha's body is the essence of vajra. The so-called vajra is imbued with seven qualities of being uncuttable, indestructible, true, solid, stable, completely unobstructable, and completely invincible. *The Mahaparinirvana Sutra* says: “The body of the Tathagata is one that is eternal, one that is indestructible, one that is adamant, and one that is not sustained by various kinds of food. It is the Dharma-Body. We should see it as it is.” The body of the Tathagata is one that is eternal—the like of Dharmakaya or Sambhogakaya that cannot be destroyed. It's nothing like the human body that is impure and must be sustained by food.

Second, during cultivation over three countless eons, the Buddha has uprooted all negativities such as the inherent evils, the evils prohibited by the Buddha, and various habitual patterns; at the same time, the Buddha has accomplished all conceivable positive qualities. How then can the Buddha be subject to defilements and physical illness?

Generally speaking, illnesses can be caused by external or internal physical factors such as weather, food, or imbalances of the four elements. Ultimately, however, bad health stems from negative deeds committed in this and past lives. When evil karma ripens now and the power of good karma is too weak to counter, one ends up falling ill. People with stubborn illnesses have sought out modern medicine or alternative treatments of massage, acupuncture, and so on; still, their symptoms see no improvement or even get worse. Feeling disappointed, they blame doctors for wasting their money. Really, though, they only have themselves to blame.

For the Buddha, he has obliterated thoroughly any and all evils; in the absence of causation, no disease can ever afflict the Buddha. In the *Treatise of Entering into the Mahayana Path*, an important shastra on Mahayana doctrine by Indian Master Sthiramati, it says: “The body of the Tathagata is like an adamant diamond; with all evils exterminated, how can it suffer from sickness?” It stresses that with all impurities removed, the Buddha’s body is like the indestructible vajra, thus it is utterly impossible for the Buddha to become sick.

Moreover, the Buddha has perfected all virtues. Practicing virtue enables one to be free from illness. The *Treatise of Entering into the Mahayana Path* tells the story of Bakkula: In the past, he offered medicaments to his fellow practitioners. Due to this virtue, he had not been inflicted by any illness in the following ninety eons. And then in this life he enjoyed excellent health well into the age of 80, when he got ordained and achieved the enlightenment of Arhat. Bakkula was foremost in good health among the Buddha’s disciples and he passed away at the age of 160. Thus, offering medicine to the monastics or needy patients reaps great benefit of health in many lifetimes. Chan Master Nan Huai-Chin knew a septuagenarian who had never been sick for a day, and another elder who had never dreamed in sleep. Thus, even in the mundane world there are people who are unfettered by health issues; what needs to be said about the Buddha, or even the enlightened noble beings?

In *Uttaratantra Shastra* Maitreya says:

*The noble have eradicated the suffering
Of dying, falling ill, and aging at its root,*

*Which is being born due to karma and poisons,
There being no such [cause], there is no such [fruit].*

This is a widely quoted verse. It means that the enlightened beings are free from the three sufferings of death, illness, and aging. How? It is because these sufferings come from karma and disturbing emotions, which the enlightened beings have vanquished completely. When causes are none, no results will ensue. Ultimately, birth, sickness, aging, and death never exist for them; when such sufferings are parading in front of us from them, the *Uttaratantra* says, it is merely the enlightened beings' compassionate display.

“Go silently, Ananda—do not revile the Tathagata, and do not let anyone else hear such coarse talk. Do not allow the gods of awesome power and virtue and the bodhisattvas who have come from pure lands in other directions to hear these words.

Vimalakirti asked Ananda not to beg the alms for the Buddha, not to slander the Buddha, and not let others hear the words that the Buddha was unwell. But probably these words had already been heard by those gods and bodhisattvas who had the super cognition of the divine ear. Today when a guru falls ill, some disciples react desperately with loud crying and so forth. Actually, making such a scene only betrays their lack of faith; they perceive the guru as an ordinary being.

When our guru Jigme Phuntsok Rinpoche was alive, he was also hospitalized due to illness. Once it happened that at the same time, the renowned Achuk Rinpoche and Khandro Tare Lhamo were admitted to the hospital as well. Rumors were circulating: “Aren't these great masters superior beings? How come they can't even keep their own bodies well? Isn't it a shame now that they are all in the hospital!” Khenpo Sodargye comments: “Well, in a hospital there are many sentient beings who need to be liberated. The masters manifest sickness in order to connect with these beings and help them.” Khenpo personally believes that it is not without wisdom intents that gurus show signs of sickness.

Devout Buddhists have no problem believing so; some practitioners in both East and West can even truly regard their gurus as buddhas. In contrast, those who have only scholarly knowledge without recourse to authentic teachers can't see the extraordinary qualities of gurus, except perhaps that the gurus are able to confer discourses and empowerment. However, should the guru be like us ordinary beings, as some Western scholars might assert, then the guru's wisdom, ability, and blessing power would be similar to ours. Yet, the facts speak to quite the opposite.

Externally, a guru appears ordinary, carrying out daily activities of eating, walking, and sleeping just like anyone else. But in reality the guru's inner realization and wisdom is utterly incomparable with the state of ordinary beings. In *Finding Comfort and Ease in the Nature of Mind* it says that in order to guide us, our guru expediently conforms to our conducts, but in truth the guru is completely different from us all.

However, not everyone can generate this conviction. Most people, relying on theories or superficial appearances, consider that gurus differ not in the slightest from ordinary beings. Even Shravakas can acknowledge the Buddha's consummate wisdom, yet they regard the Buddha's body as an ordinary compounded entity. Therefore when Shravakas prostrate to the Buddha, their homage is paid to the wisdom aspect of Buddha's mind, not to the Buddha's "compounded" body. This is the difference in regard to how to view the Buddha's body between Shravakayana and Mahayana.

“Ananda, even a small degree of blessings (i.e., merit) allows the wheel- turning sage king (*cakravartin*) to be without illness—how could the immeasurable blessings of the Tathagata fail to exceed his in every regard?!

“Go, Ananda—do not make us experience this shame. If brahmins in the heterodox paths hear this, they will think, “Who is this teacher, who is unable to save himself from illness but would save others of their ills?” Sir, go in secret haste and do not let anyone hear this.

Due to some small virtues in previous lives, the wheel-turning sage kings have magnificent bodies, enjoy long lives and stay free from illness. So how then could the Buddha, who has amassed an infinite collection of merit and wisdom, become sick? It is impossible. So Vimalakirti went on: “If non-Buddhists and brahmins hear this, they would think to themselves: ‘How can this man be called the savior of all sentient beings? He cannot even save himself from illness! Isn't he supposed to be the King of Physicians who can cure all physical and mental illnesses throughout the world? If he can't even cure his own illness, how can he pretend to heal the illnesses of all others?’” Vimalakirti urged Ananda to go home discreetly right away and forget about getting alms.

Today there are many solicitations asking money for temples, gurus, masters, or other pretexts, which Khenpo considers an embarrassing situation that disgraces Buddhism. We must be scrupulous about the intentions behind them. Having been a Dharma teacher for over three

decades, Khenpo himself has come across scores of Buddhists who don't align their actions with the Dharma. Khenpo feels a mood of renunciation and weariness akin to what Longchenpa expressed in his *Thirty Words of Advice from the Heart*. Actually, accomplished gurus are free from any attachment so that material possessions, be they nicely adorned temples, iPhones, or tasty food, are equally like vomit to them. What they really need is the enlightenment of all living beings, that is, that everyone can study and practice the authentic Dharma, eventually dispel the darkness of ignorance and break free from samsara. Therefore, as disciples we must refrain from acting improperly, for instance, asking for donations or doing facile rituals in the name of our gurus.

Here Vimalakirti gave excellent teachings regarding this kind of behavior. Ananda was foremost in hearing the Buddha's teachings, but probably he could have wrongly understood the Buddha's secret intent, and ended up being scolded by Vimalakirti. For us followers, we should keep this teaching in our minds and do not harm Buddhism due to our lack of wisdom.

“You should understand, Ananda, the bodies of the Tathagatas are bodies of the Dharma, not bodies of longing. The Buddha is the World-Honored One, who has transcended the triple world. The Buddha's body is without flaws, the flaws having been extinguished. The Buddha's body is unconditioned and does not fit the [conventional] analytic categories. A body such as this—how could it be ill, how could it be vexed?”

According to Master Kuiji, Vimalakirti's teaching mainly has two parts, the previous part is to explain the Buddha has no illness from the aspect of Sambhogakaya, and the following part is from the aspect of Dharmakaya. The bodies of the Tathagatas are bodies of the Dharma, not the bodies stemmed from conceptual mind of beings in desire realm. The Tibetan version says that the Buddha's body is not sustained by material food.

As *Avatamsaka Sutra* states:

Infinite, tranquil, the reality-body

Is nondual and pure.

Sentient beings clinging to duality,

You guide by myriad emanations.

The Buddha's dharmakaya is eternally tranquil, free from duality, subject and object. However, in order to benefit sentient beings, the Buddha manifested various forms. From the aspect of

Dharmakaya or absolute body, none of the afflictions such as disease ever exists.

The Buddha is the most precious and transcendental in the whole world; his body is above and beyond the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness. The Buddha's body is indestructible and flawless. According to *Abhidharmakosa Shastra*, "flaw" is defined as "being contaminated" by mental afflictions or "having leakages" relating to the six sense doors. Further, it explains that a contaminated body is subject to the multiplying effects of association and conditions. The Buddha's body, however, is in stark contrast to these descriptions.

The Buddha's body is unconditioned, free from all extremes; like a vajra, it is unsullied by characteristics and flaws. This is as explicated in *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, "By correctly upholding wonderful Dharma, one obtains this adamantine body."

The sutra tells a story relating to such an indestructible vajra body. In the past, a monk named Authentic Dharma dedicated himself earnestly to propagating the Dharma. A degenerate and vicious monk became spiteful of him and found an opportunity to attack him with weapons. The king of the country, who had been a patron of the Dharma, came to the rescue. Although Monk Authentic Dharma was saved, the king, however, was fatally wounded. As the king lay dying, he declared: "I'm willing to sacrifice my life for upholding the Dharma. I have no regret that I paid with my life for it!" By the power of his merit, the king attained the vajra body in all his future lifetimes. This king was one of the previous incarnation of Buddha Shakyamuni, and the monk Buddha Kasyapa.

To follow the Buddha's footsteps, we should strive to uphold the Dharma. However, we may not fulfill our wishes now, since even the king in the story had to succumb to evil forces, which is ever raging and harder to vanquish in this degenerate age. Nevertheless, as long as we continue to uphold the Dharma wholeheartedly, opportunities to promote the Dharma will appear in all our future lifetimes.

Human life is full of twists and turns; there is no telling what lurks behind the corners of each path. Some people always experience smooth sailing, while others are often hammered by unforeseen disasters. Regardless of what befalls us, we must not react to our situations impulsively, but rather face them calmly with wisdom and rationality.

The guru is the one who shows us the true path of the Dharma, and we should aspire to propagate the guru's teachings, even when the guru is still alive. Authentic gurus don't need

students to fuss about their physical bodies, because they dwell in an indestructible abode that is the wisdom Dharmakaya. When a guru passes into parinirvana, it's of no use for disciples to become despondent; instead, focus earnestly on how to keep alive and spread the guru's wisdom legacy. This is vital.

“At the time, World-Honored One, I was really ashamed that I might have mistakenly heard what the Buddha had said in spite of being so close.

“I then heard a voice from space saying, ‘Ananda, it's as the retired scholar has said. It is just that the Buddha has appeared in this evil age of the five corruptions and manifests this Dharma to emancipate sentient beings. Go, Ananda. Take the milk without shame.’

Upon hearing Vimalakirti's words, Ananda was very much ashamed and started to have doubt about himself: “Hadn't I been Buddha's close attendant, and shouldn't I understand his wisdom intent well? How could I have misheard his words?”

At that moment Ananda heard a voice in the sky saying, “Ananda, what this layperson said is right. Nevertheless, since the Buddha has appeared in this time of five degenerations (the degeneration of time, sentient beings, lifespan, actions/view, and afflictions), he uses the expedient means of displaying sickness to liberate living beings. Ananda, you need not be ashamed, go ahead to fetch the milk!” Several masters commented that there was no clue whose voice it is, and it could be from the Buddha, gods or bodhisattvas, or even Vimalakirti himself. It makes sense for any of them to encourage Ananda to go ahead to ask for the milk alms.

Master Kuiji says in his Commentary that as an attendant of the Buddha, the wisdom of Ananda is far below the Buddha's, so he failed to truly understand Buddha's intent. This problem happens to many disciples today also, who have no idea as to their gurus' inner thoughts, their likes and dislikes. Therefore, physical closeness does not equate to closeness pertaining to the minds.

Ananda was encouraged by the voice from the sky, and went ahead to fetch milk. There both the cow and her calf knelt to Ananda to offer milk with great respect. Then many brahmins, including the disciples of that great Brahman, were shocked to see this outcome and an incomparable faith in the Buddha aroused in them. Isn't it a wonderful ending of the story!

There are many accounts on how the Buddha makes “demonstrations”, which Khenpo says deserves our attention. He cites an example in the *Vinaya*: Once, the Buddha was on alms round with Ananda. The rice offered to them was only half-cooked, and Ananda thought it unsuitable for the Buddha who had just recovered from an illness. He then gathered firewood and hurriedly made a fire to cook the rice again. The Buddha saw it and asked: “Ananda, what are you doing?” Ananda replied: “The rice is only half-cooked and may be bad for you. I want to cook it thoroughly just to make sure.” At that the Buddha did not stop Ananda, but instead praised: “Very good, very good indeed!” It is apparent from this story that even though the Buddha was endowed with a vajra body, he still presented himself as a person of an ordinary physical constitution liable to the ills of indigestible rice. As Buddhists, we need to appreciate the Buddha’s manifestations and understand the message.

“World-Honored One, the eloquence of Vimalakirti’s wisdom is like this. Therefore, I cannot accept [your instruction] to go inquire about his illness.”

The above is what Vimalakirti taught Ananda when he begged for alms. As Vimalakirti commanded such wisdom and eloquence as this, thus Ananda was not qualified to call on him.

In similar fashion, all of the Buddha’s five hundred great disciples each explained their original encounters and related what Vimalakirti had said, and each said he was unable to accept [the Buddha’s instruction] to go inquire about [Vimalakirti’s] illness.

In the same manner, the rest of the five hundred disciples, upon being requested by the Buddha, told the Buddha one by one their own encounter with Vimalakirti and the reason why they were reluctant to visit this special patient. In the text, only the above ten stories are narrated in detail and the rest are all skipped. It is quite necessary to do so, like in the process of studying tantrayana, we first need to focus on some essential and representative teachings for our study and practice, and the whole tantric teachings are just too vast for us to comprehend in this short life. On the other hand, as Khenpo mentioned, if they were available, it would be wonderful to read through all these 500 stories since each of them must have a unique point to deal with a specific mental affliction.