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THE TRANSCENDENTAL CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

Once our basic needs for food, clothing, shelter, and leisure have been met, what do we need more than anything else in life? What is our essential need as human beings? Surely it is freedom. The real meaning of human life is to develop our distinctively human characteristics: awareness, emotional positivity, responsibility for ourselves and others, and creativity. But we cannot develop, we cannot grow, unless we have space – both literally and metaphorically – to grow into. We need freedom: freedom from all that restricts us, both outside us and within us, freedom from our own conditioning, even freedom from our old self.

And what helps us to be free – apart from our own efforts – is, or at least is considered to be, religion. We have seen that in Buddhism the spiritual life is frequently described in terms of freedom, but Buddhism is not alone in this. The followers of other religions, at least the universal religions, would probably also say that their religion stands for the freedom of the individual. The Christian might quote from the New Testament the words: 'You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.'[341]

But if we consider what it is that stops us from becoming free – apart from our own sloth and torpor, laziness, neglect, forgetfulness, and so on – we encounter a tremendous paradox. Strangely enough, religion, rather than helping us to become spiritually free, only too often helps to keep us enslaved, and even adds further shackles to our chains. To many people, the very idea that religion has anything to do with freedom

sounds like an absurd contradiction in terms. Some people, and I must confess that I am among them, feel uncomfortable using – in a sense being obliged to use – the word 'religion' at all.

We find it so difficult to associate religion with freedom – we in the West, that is – not because of what religion is in principle, but rather because of its historical record. Take, for example, the record of Christianity over the last sixteen hundred years, since it was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire. It is fairly obvious that we cannot develop as individuals unless we are free at least to think for ourselves. But organized Christianity – certainly in the form of its major churches – has hardly ever allowed the individual that freedom. People in Christian countries have been obliged to think as the Church thought, to toe the theological line – or face the consequences. Even today, what the Church calls blasphemy is still a criminal offence in Britain.[342]

Not only has organized Christianity refused to allow individuals to think for themselves. It has made them think in ways actually detrimental, actually inimical, to their own personal development. It has made them think of themselves as miserable sinners, as weak and powerless, made them think that being independent and taking the initiative is wrong, if not positively sinful.

So what went wrong? How is it that religion has become not a liberator but a jailer? The short answer is that religion has become an end in itself. The forms which religion takes – doctrines, rituals, institutions, rules – have all become ends in themselves. It has been forgotten that religion is a means to an end – that end being the individual's development from ignorance to Enlightenment, from mundane consciousness to transcendental consciousness.

What are we to do in this situation? We need to grow, we need to become free, and we need something to help us do so. If we agree to call that thing 'religion', how are we to make sure that religion does not become a means of enslaving or stultifying, even of crushing, the individual? We need something that will constantly remind us of the limitations of religion, something that will constantly remind us that religion is only a means to an end. In other words, we need a transcendental critique of religion. And in chapters 3 and 4 of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* we find such a critique. In Thurman's translation these chapters are entitled 'The Disciples' Reluctance to Visit Vimalakīrti' and 'The Reluctance of the Bodhisattvas'.

We have already learned that, out of his skilful means, out of his great Compassion, Vimalakīrti has fallen sick. Many people have come to visit him and enquire after his health, and he has taken the opportunity of teaching them the Dharma. At the beginning of chapter 3, we find Vimalakīrti at home, in his own room, lying on his bed. And as he lies there, a thought passes through his mind – or perhaps, as he is an advanced bodhisattva, we should say that he allows a thought to pass through his mind. He thinks:

> I am sick, lying on my bed in pain, yet the Tathāgata, the saint, the perfectly accomplished Buddha, does not consider me or take pity upon me, and sends no one to inquire after my illness.

The Buddha, meanwhile, is in Āmrapālī's garden on the outskirts of the city of Vaiśālī teaching the great assembly of *arhants*, bodhisattvas, and others. And as he sits there teaching, the Buddha becomes aware of the thought passing through Vimalakīrti's mind. It's as though the two of them are playing a sort of game. After all, Vimalakīrti is not really sick in the ordinary sense, and presumably the Buddha knows that, but he seems quite happy to play his part in the game, quite willing to 'play ball'.

So what is his next move? Knowing the thought that is passing through Vimalakīrti's mind, the Buddha says: 'Śāriputra,' – in the Mahāyāna *sūtras* it always seems to be poor old Śāriputra who gets singled out – 'go to inquire after the illness of Vimalakīrti.' Or, as we would say, 'Please go and enquire after his health' – an interesting difference of idiom.

Śāriputra is one of the two leading disciples of the Buddha, the other being Mahāmaudgalyāyana. He is an *arhant*, so he has gained individual emancipation, he is liberated at least from the ordinary passions. But what does he say? He says 'I am reluctant to go', or, more literally, 'I am not very keen on going.' He does not actually refuse – after all, it is the Buddha who is asking him to go – but he would much rather not, and he explains why. One day, he says, he was sitting at the foot of a tree in the forest – as good monks were supposed to do in ancient India – absorbed in contemplation, when Vimalakīrti happened to pass by. 'That is not the way to absorb yourself in contemplation,' he told Śāriputra. And he proceeded to explain what absorption in contemplation really was. His explanation was so profound that Śāriputra was left dumbfounded,

and quite unable to reply. This is why he is unwilling to go and ask Vimalakīrti about his illness. He has had some experience of Vimalakīrti before, and he is not very keen on encountering him again.

The Buddha tries again. He asks Mahāmaudgalyāyana to go. But, strange to say, Mahāmaudgalyāyana is also reluctant. It seems that he too has been rebuked by Vimalakīrti. One day, when he was teaching the Dharma to some householders, Vimalakīrti came along and told him how it should really be done – and Mahāmaudgalyāyana was also left dumbfounded by his remarks.

In this way, the Buddha asks ten of the leading *arhant* disciples to go. He asks Mahākāśyapa, Subhūti, Pūrṇa, Kātyāyana, Aniruddha, Upāli, Rāhula, even Ānanda. But, one and all, they are reluctant to go; they have all had some previous experience of dear old Vimalakīrti. He has exposed the spiritual shortcomings of them all. In doing so, he has exposed, in fact, as we shall see, the spiritual shortcomings of the Hīnayāna when its teachings are taken literally, taken as ends in themselves.

So the Buddha turns to the bodhisattvas who are also in the great assembly. (One gets the impression that he is rather enjoying this little game.) He asks Maitreya to go and enquire about Vimalakīrti's illness. Maitreya is of course the future Buddha, who at present resides in the Tuṣita *devaloka*, the 'contented' heaven, waiting for the time when he will be reborn on earth for his last life, in which he will himself gain supreme perfect Enlightenment as a Buddha. But even he, even Maitreya, would rather not go. He too has already encountered Vimalakīrti.

One day, he says, while he was speaking with the gods of the Tuṣita heaven, Vimalakīrti turned up, and said:

> Maitreya, the Buddha has prophesied that after one more birth you will attain supreme perfect Enlightenment. But what is the nature of that birth? Is it past, present, or future?

And he went on to show, with great dialectical skill, that it could not be any of these. He showed that the very notion of birth – and also the notion of birthlessness – is self-contradictory. He showed that in reality there is no such thing as the attainment of Enlightenment – in fact, no such thing as Enlightenment at all. He even showed that there is no such thing as Maitreya, no such thing as a future Buddha. Maitreya was

rendered speechless. He too is therefore reluctant to go to Vimalakīrti and enquire about his illness.

The Buddha next asks Prabhāvyūha; but Prabhāvyūha has had a similar experience. One day he just happened to meet Vimalakīrti, who asked him where he was coming from – an innocent enough question. Prabhāvyūha replied that he was coming from the *bodhimaṇḍa*, the 'place of Enlightenment'. In other words, he was coming from Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha gained supreme perfect Enlightenment, and in particular from the *vajrāsana*, the diamond throne, the place where the Buddha sat under the bodhi tree. That was where he was coming from, he said. Vimalakīrti thereupon explained to him at some length that the *bodhimaṇḍa* is not really a place at all but a state of mind, something from which there is no question of a bodhisattva coming, because he is in it all the time. Everything a bodhisattva does is an expression of it. Not unnaturally, Prabhāvyūha too was rendered speechless, and thus he also is reluctant to visit Vimalakīrti. He does not want another dose of the same medicine.

The Buddha asks two more of the great bodhisattvas – Jagatīṃdhara and Sudatta – to go, but for similar reasons they too are reluctant. In the end the Buddha asks Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom – but that is another story, and what happens we will see in the next chapter. The point here is that Vimalakīrti has exposed the spiritual shortcomings of Maitreya and the other bodhisattvas. He has, in other words, exposed the spiritual shortcomings of the Mahāyāna taken literally, taken as an end in itself.

It is fairly obvious what Vimalakīrti represents here, but not so easy to put it into words. We could say that Vimalakīrti represents truth or reality itself devoid of all concepts. That will do provided we don't take it too literally, provided we don't let it roll off the tongue too glibly. We could say that Vimalakīrti represents the actual Enlightenment experience. For what happens when our partial spiritual experiences are brought into contact with truth or reality? What happens when the means to Enlightenment – our rituals, our doctrines, our institutions, our rules – are brought into contact with the Enlightenment experience?

What happens is that their limitations are revealed. And this can be a very painful and traumatic experience indeed – painful and traumatic, that is, for those who identify themselves with their own partial spiritual experiences, and derive their emotional security from that identification.

Vimalakīrti is like a high-voltage current of electricity. You touch him at your peril – except that you don't touch him; he comes along and touches you. In traditional terms, Vimalakīrti is like a great *vajra*, a great thunderbolt or diamond. He is powerful, he is incisive, and at the same time he is brilliant and scintillating. He bursts through all your defences, all your limitations. He destroys what you are so that you are free to become what you can be.

Vimalakīrti's effect on people reminds me of the main character in a film I saw some years ago: Pasolini's *Theorem*. In this film, in a very brief space of time, this one person has a tremendous impact on the lives of those who encounter him. He is a young salesman who spends the weekend with a middle-class Italian family. (He has some business with the father of the family, who is the head of an industrial concern.) The family consists of father, mother, grown-up son, grown-up daughter, and not-so-young maidservant, and in the course of the weekend the young man manages to have affairs with all of them. The rest of the film shows the dramatic results of their contact with him. The mother becomes a nymphomaniac. The daughter has a nervous breakdown; we see her being taken away in an ambulance to a mental hospital. The son, an artist, destroys all his paintings. The maidservant becomes a nun and works miracles. In the last scene the father is seen walking through a crowded railway station slowly taking off his clothes. The critics, I remember, had a field day discussing the meaning of this film, especially what the young man represented. Some said that he was a sort of Christ figure, others that he symbolized reality – and some thought he was just being himself.

In these two chapters of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, the irruption of Vimalakīrti into the lives of the disciples and the bodhisattvas happens on a much higher level, and has a much more positive effect – but it is still devastating. The impact of reality in any form has a shattering effect on anyone's life. Each of the disciples and bodhisattvas concerned is left dumbfounded. Thurman comments: 'He' – the disciple or the bodhisattva – 'is overwhelmed and speechless, yet intuitively recognizes the rightness of Vimalakīrti's statements. He can neither accept them and put them into practice nor reject them outright.'[343]

This is perhaps something that we too may experience on our own level of development. When our *kalyāṇa mitra*, our 'good friend', points out something about our own character that we have not noticed before, or something about the Dharma that is new to us, to begin with we may

feel simply stunned. We have to recognize the truth of what is being said but, initially at least, we are quite unable to do anything about it. It takes time to adjust to new knowledge and put it into practice.

So it is not surprising that the disciples and the bodhisattvas are 'not very keen' on going to meet Vimalakīrti. It is not surprising that the partial experience should be reluctant to encounter the total experience, that the means to Enlightenment should be reluctant to encounter Enlightenment itself. The experience is too painful, too traumatic. But although it may be painful, or even traumatic, it is highly positive. The purpose of Vimalakīrti's strictures is not to humiliate the disciples and the bodhisattvas. He is not just 'putting them down'. His purpose is to help them to move on from their present partial experience, their present relatively limited outlook. (It is only *relatively* limited because they are, after all, *arhants* and bodhisattvas.)

We also need to bear in mind that Vimalakīrti's behaviour here exemplifies the skilful means of an advanced bodhisattva. When we ourselves feel the need to criticize someone's behaviour, we need to make sure that we are doing so from a positive basis. We should certainly be careful not to upset people for the sake of it. At the same time, we should not hold back from speaking the truth simply because people may find it upsetting. If you can put your point effectively in a gentle way, that is clearly best. But very often a point does not get across to people unless it has some edge. They may be so closed to any views other than their own that a dignified, objective, and emotionally neutral statement of your point of view has little effect, in which case you may have to express yourself more trenchantly. And unfortunately it is not always possible to make a point without making a personal criticism of someone. If their views stem directly from their character, and you are criticizing those views, you can hardly help criticizing their character too. The purpose of criticism is to help someone grow and develop. Therefore, the rule of thumb is to upset people as little as possible, while still saying what you feel must be said.

In the same way, the purpose of the transcendental critique of religion is not to destroy religion, but rather to restore it to its true function, which is to be a means to an end, a means to the spiritual development of the individual. All that is destroyed is religion as an end in itself. The transcendental critique of religion is therefore essential to the very existence of religion. It must accompany it all the time. It is important to

understand this; it's important to understand it in detail. So let us look a little more closely at the encounters of some of the Buddha's disciples, Pūrṇa, Upāli, Rāhula, and Ānanda, and the bodhisattva Jagatīṃdhara, with Vimalakīrti.

First, the disciple Pūrṇa. Pūrṇa was teaching the Hīnayāna doctrine to some young monks in the forest when Vimalakīrti came along. And Vimalakīrti said that Pūrṇa was teaching the monks wrongly, because they were capable of following the Mahāyāna, which was a higher teaching. Now, Vimalakīrti was not criticizing Pūrṇa simply for teaching the Hīnayāna instead of the Mahāyāna. After all, as we have seen, he was quite capable of exposing the limitations of the Mahāyāna too, considered as an end in itself. He was criticizing Pūrṇa for teaching the Dharma mechanically, without looking to see what the spiritual needs of the young monks really were. He said:

> Reverend Pūrṇa, first concentrate yourself, regard the minds of these young *bhikṣus*, and then teach them the Dharma! Do not put rotten food into a jeweled bowl! First understand the inclination of these monks, and do not confuse priceless sapphires with glass beads!
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> Reverend Pūrṇa, without examining the spiritual faculties of living beings, do not presume upon the one-sidedness of their faculties; do not wound those who are without wounds; do not impose a narrow path upon those who aspire to a great path; do not try to pour the great ocean into the hoof-print of an ox; do not try to put Mount Sumeru into a grain of mustard; do not confuse the brilliance of the sun with the light of a glowworm; and do not expose those who admire the roar of a lion to the howl of a jackal![344]

As a result of listening to Vimalakīrti's critique, Pūrṇa realized:

> The disciples, who do not know the thoughts or the inclinations of others, are not able to teach the Dharma to anyone.

This is a pretty strong statement. Vimalakīrti is criticizing Pūrṇa for not being in real communication with the people he is teaching. Pūrṇa seems to have a fixed idea about the Dharma, to think that it consists in *this* particular teaching and *that* particular conceptual formulation; and this

is what he conveys to the people he teaches, regardless of whether or not it will actually help them to develop.

Some Eastern Buddhist teachers tend to do this when they come to the West. They have learned about the Dharma in the East and they think that all they have to do is repeat it in the West. But to communicate the Dharma effectively, you need to be aware of the spiritual needs of the people you are teaching – and this takes time. Vimalakīrti is not criticizing Pūrṇa for teaching the Dharma; he is criticizing him for teaching it in the wrong way, for regarding the teaching of the Dharma as an end in itself.

I found myself teaching the Dharma 'in the wrong way' in India some years ago. I was asked to lecture regularly on full moon days at a certain Buddhist hall in Calcutta. A lot of people, in fact hundreds of people, mostly Bengali Buddhists, used to come, but I soon realized that they had not come to listen to the Dharma. They saw the occasion as a social gathering, and there would always be quite a lot of noise, shouting and talking, going on. What they actually wanted was a monk just talking quietly away in the corner, lending a faint air of religiosity to the proceedings. My suspicions were confirmed when I eventually complained to the head monk about the behaviour of the audience (although they weren't really an *audience* because they weren't listening). He said 'It doesn't matter if nobody can hear what you're saying; we just want you to lecture on the Dharma.' A lecture on the Dharma had become part of the social ritual. Someone had to be seen to be giving it, but it didn't matter whether or not anybody could hear or understand what was being said. The whole thing had become quite meaningless. So I had actually been asked to teach the Dharma 'in the wrong way'. This is an example – rather an extreme one – of the sort of thing that Vimalakīrti is getting at.

Now for Upāli's encounter with Vimalakīrti. Among all the Buddha's disciples, Upāli was the great expert in the *Vinaya* or monastic law, and it was because of this expertise that one day he was approached by two monks. They had committed some offence against the monastic rule, and, ashamed to appear before the Buddha, they went instead to Upāli and asked him to remove their anxieties by accepting their confession and witnessing their promise not to commit the offence again – that being the regular monastic procedure. Upāli agreed, and into the bargain gave them what the text calls a 'religious discourse'.

At this point Vimalakīrti came along and said that Upāli was only making matters worse. He said:

> Reverend Upāli, do not aggravate further the sins of these two monks. Without perplexing them, relieve their remorse. Reverend Upāli, sin is not to be apprehended within, or without, or between the two. Why? The Buddha has said, 'Living beings are afflicted by the passions of thought, and they are purified by the purification of thought.'[345]

He went on to say quite a lot more of a metaphysical nature, but this passage is enough for our present purpose. What is Vimalakīrti getting at? Why does he say that Upāli is only making matters worse? What does he mean by saying that there is no such thing as sin? Let us look at the situation. The two monks have committed an offence – that is, they have broken a rule. But why was the rule laid down in the first place? It was laid down to help the individual – in this case the individual monk – to grow spiritually. Having broken the rule, the two monks have put an obstacle in the way of their spiritual development. They have perhaps even regressed. So Upāli should not be concerned simply with the fact that they have broken the rule; that would be to treat the rule as an end in itself. His main concern, Vimalakīrti is implying, should be to get them back on the right path.

Belief in 'sin' is nothing but a stumbling block which arises out of treating rules as ends in themselves. When we break them, 'sin' comes into existence, and we waste time worrying about how to get rid of it instead of getting on with the task of our individual development. This is of course an essentially Christian predicament. If you believe in God, and the laws or commandments he is said to have laid down, what happens if you break one of those rules? 'Sin' comes into existence, and you feel guilt and fear of punishment. And when this happens, you need someone to save you from the consequences of your sin: a saviour. All this is what is known as 'religion' in the West. In fact, the situation is even more complicated, because sin came into existence before we were even born, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. According to the Christian tradition, sin is our inheritance; we are born into sin. This is the predicament of the Christian, as well as that of the ex-Christian who is not aware that past

indoctrination is still having an effect. It is to avoid such a predicament that we need to be aware of the danger of regarding rules as ends in themselves. This is why Vimalakīrti takes Upāli so firmly to task.

Vimalakīrti says that there is no such thing as sin. He says:

> Sin is not to be apprehended within, or without, or between the two.

In other words, sin is a mere concept, a mere word. Consider the effect of doing something unskilful. It will in most cases have affected someone else, and it is important that one should regret that. But this is only part of it. The action will also have had the effect of hindering one's own spiritual progress. If you have something of which to repent, your urge to develop has weakened, at least to some degree, and it needs to be revitalized. The two things – repentance for what you have done and renewal of your inspiration – are closely interlinked.

Vimalakīrti is simply making the point that your concern should go beyond your failures. Yes, you do have to repent unskilful acts, you have to resolve to do better, you have to experience remorse. But you must also make sure that you revive your original inspiration; because it was due to the flagging of that inspiration that you committed the unskilful action in the first place. So you have to deal with the unskilful action itself – and possibly with its consequences – but within the context of reviving your inspiration. The two are not alternatives; you really need to do both. In fact, one might say that you can genuinely repent only if there is a genuine revival of your inspiration.

So the first thing you have to do is try to understand what you have done. Then you cultivate a sense of regret that you have done it, especially if it has involved injury to another person. Thirdly, you resolve not to do that particular thing again. And fourthly, you take steps to ensure that in future you do what is right. 'Sin' does not come into it at all. That's why Vimalakīrti quotes the Buddha as saying:

> Living beings are afflicted by the passions of thought, and they are purified by the purification of thought.

As to the steps you take to modify your behaviour in future, here you must tread carefully. It is probably not helpful, for example, to think

in terms of penances. It is important to remember that you are not punishing yourself. 'Discipline' is probably a better word to use in a Buddhist context. For example, suppose you became aware that your behaviour was unskilful with regard to food – that you were greedy – and you therefore decided to limit your intake of food. That would be an attempt to retrain yourself, to modify your behaviour based on your understanding. It would not be a punishment for eating too much.

The term penance, as ordinarily used, seems to mean something halfway between a punishment and a discipline. A penance is intended to 'pay for', 'make up for', what one has done. For example, a Catholic may be given the penance of, say, reciting ten 'Hail Marys' – quite a mild penance for some small sin – and it is presumably intended to inspire the penitent with thoughts of the Virgin Mary so that they don't commit that sin again. But if it is taken as a sort of spiritual bookkeeping, it probably doesn't contribute all that much to spiritual development. Often people know in advance what sort of penance they will get if they commit a particular sin; they know that they will do the penance and then they will be 'quits'. You then get a cycle of unskilful action – penance – unskilful action – penance – and so on. In the end you hardly remember which came first. You can even end up thinking in terms of having permission to do something unskilful because you have done the penance, in which case there will be no real modification of your behaviour or mental attitude. Penance has spiritual value only when it is seen not as a sort of punishment but as a discipline, intelligently imposed upon oneself in order to check certain unskilful attitudes and develop more skilful ones.

One has to be careful not to put oneself through a kind of aversion therapy, in which one instils an unconscious reaction or revulsion against a particular course of action. Clearly this sort of counter-conditioning can have no spiritual value, and probably no ethical value either. It results in 'ethical' behaviour through the most basic motivation: fear of pain if one does otherwise. One must guard against conditioning oneself in a particular way without properly understanding what is happening and without genuinely changing one's attitude.

Next we come to Vimalakīrti's encounter with Rāhula. Rāhula was, of course, the Buddha's son, and he had become his grandfather's heir after his father had left home and gone forth. So in going forth himself, Rāhula renounced not only the world, but also the throne.[346] And when

a number of Licchavi youths asked him why he had renounced the kingdom, he outlined for them the benefits and virtues of renouncing the world. But as he was getting into his stride, Vimalakīrti came along and said that Rāhula was explaining the matter all wrong. He said:

> Renunciation is itself the very absence of virtues and benefits. Reverend Rāhula, one may speak of benefits and virtues in regard to compounded things, but renunciation is uncompounded, and there can be no question of benefits and virtues in regard to the uncompounded.[347]

Renunciation – leaving the world – is essentially a spiritual activity. It is not a matter of *gaining* – even gaining benefits and virtues – but of growing. However, the young men still do not understand. They say:

> We have heard the Tathāgata [the Buddha] declare that one should not renounce the world without the permission of one's parents.

They are still thinking in formal terms: in terms of a formal leaving of the world, in terms of becoming a monk in a literal or technical sense. Vimalakīrti returns to his point more emphatically than ever. He says:

> Young men, you should cultivate yourselves intensively to conceive the spirit of unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. That in itself will be your renunciation and high ordination!

Renunciation consists in the development of the *bodhicitta*, in Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels. 'Leaving the world' and 'becoming a monk' are not ends in themselves. Vimalakīrti is not saying that these forms of renunciation are unnecessary. He is saying that the outer action is of value only to the extent that it is the expression of an inner attitude. You are not a monk simply because you are wearing a yellow robe.

Now we come to the story of Ānanda's meeting with Vimalakīrti. Ānanda was the Buddha's personal attendant and companion for the last twenty years of the Buddha's life. Naturally he was in close contact with the Buddha, and sometimes we get the impression that he was quite attached to him as a person. One day, it seems, the Buddha was unwell and needed some milk to help him recover. So Ānanda took his

begging-bowl and went to the mansion of a great Brahmin family to beg for some. Vimalakīrti turned up and asked Ānanda what he was doing there so early in the morning, and Ānanda said:

> The body of the Lord manifests some indisposition, and he needs some milk. Therefore, I have come to fetch some.[348]

Vimalakīrti then proceeded to scold Ānanda for saying such a thing:

> Reverend Ānanda, the Tathāgatas have the body of the Dharma – not a body that is sustained by material food. The Tathāgatas have a transcendental body that has transcended all mundane qualities.… Reverend Ānanda, to believe there can be illness in such a body is irrational and unseemly!

The gist of Vimalakīrti's reply is that the Buddha should not be identified with his physical body, but with the *dharmakāya*, the body of truth, the body of reality. The physical body – even that of the Buddha – is not an end in itself, but a means to Enlightenment. When you have seen the physical body of the Buddha, you should not think you have seen the Buddha himself. The Buddha is essentially the Enlightened mind.

Hearing this, Ānanda felt ashamed that he had misunderstood the Dharma in this way. But a voice from the sky spoke, telling Ānanda not to be ashamed. After all, the Buddha does in a sense have a body, at least for a while. The voice said:

> Since the Buddha has appeared during the time of the five corruptions, he disciplines human beings by acting lowly and humble.

The suggestion is that the Buddha's illness, like that of Vimalakīrti, is skilful means; so Ānanda should go and get the milk.

The bodhisattva Jagatīṃdhara's encounter with Vimalakīrti happened as he was receiving an unexpected and extraordinary visit at home one day: a visit from Māra, the evil one.[349] Māra did not come as Māra, of course – Māra never does! He came disguised as Indra, the king of the gods, and accompanied by twelve thousand heavenly maidens, all singing and playing music. What a scene they must have

presented: the glorious figure of the king of the gods – as he seemed to be – in a blaze of light, decked with jewels; the twelve thousand heavenly maidens, no doubt looking very elegant in all sorts of silken drapery, with their hair floating down their backs; and all of them singing and playing wonderful music. (Imagine perhaps a highly trained choir of twelve thousand singing Monteverdi's 'Vespers'.) Then Māra, as Indra, saluted Jagatīṃdhara very meekly and humbly, even going to the extreme of touching the bodhisattva's feet with his head, before standing respectfully to one side.

Jagatīṃdhara was completely taken in by this – as one usually is by Māra's disguises. He rose to the occasion and delivered a little sermon – I think we can call it that – suitable for a god: a sermon on impermanence. Māra appeared to be deeply moved and, to show gratitude, asked Jagatīṃdhara to accept the twelve thousand divine maidens as his servants. But Jagatīṃdhara was not a complete fool. He declined the offer, saying that heavenly maidens were not suitable servants for someone like himself who had taken up the spiritual life.

At this point Vimalakīrti entered on the scene and exposed what was going on. He said to Jagatīṃdhara:

> Noble son, do not think that this is Indra! This is not Indra but the evil Māra, who has come to ridicule you.[350]

And to Māra he said that since Jagatīṃdhara was unable to accept the divine maidens, he, Vimalakīrti, would give them a home.

Even the disciples and bodhisattvas were reluctant to meet Vimalakīrti, so you can guess how Māra felt. He was absolutely terrified. He tried to make a quick getaway, but it was no use. In the end he had to hand over all twelve thousand heavenly maidens – who were of course really Māra's daughters in disguise. And Vimalakīrti set about teaching the heavenly maidens to practise the Dharma. In the end he taught them to develop the *bodhicitta*, the will to supreme Enlightenment for the benefit of all beings. Even that is not the end of the story. Māra later tried to get his daughters back, but they returned to him inspired by the Dharma and ready to inspire others.

So what does all this mean? Māra's daughters, the heavenly maidens, represent the emotions, the passions, in their relatively crude and unrefined forms. Obviously one who has taken up the spiritual life

should not succumb to them, but should have them well under control. This stage of development is represented by Jagatīṃdhara, whose name, significantly perhaps, means 'Ruler of the World'.

But control, conscious control, is not the last word in the spiritual life. Rejection is not enough. Asceticism is not an end in itself. After all, the emotions have to be converted; they have to be transformed; they have to contribute their energies to the spiritual life. It is this stage that is represented by Vimalakīrti.

According to Thurman there is a definitely Tantric element in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, especially in this passage. This may well be so, but we should be careful not to misunderstand this possibility. We need to avoid falling into the trap of thinking that we are accepting Māra's daughters as Vimalakīrti did when we are really only succumbing to them like an ordinary person. The stage represented by Jagatīṃdhara is one that most of us will be in for a very long time – assuming we can reach it, that is. But in the long run, it is not an end in itself; it is only a means to an end.

Having taken a closer look at the encounters of some of the disciples and bodhisattvas with Vimalakīrti, we should now be quite clear about the main point. As Vimalakīrti's 'transcendental critique' serves to remind us, the Hīnayāna is a means to an end. The Mahāyāna is a means to an end. Buddhism is a means to an end. Religion is a means to an end. And that end is the spiritual development of the individual.

This critique has always been part of Buddhism. The Buddha said 'I teach the Dharma under the figure of a raft.'[351] In other words, just as a raft is useful for getting you across the water, but you wouldn't carry it with you once you had reached dry land, so the Buddha's teaching is useful for carrying us across the waters of *saṃsāra*, but we will have no need for it when we have reached the other shore of Enlightenment. This sort of emphasis is particularly strong in the Mahāyāna, and strongest of all, perhaps, in Zen. You get Japanese and Chinese pictures of the Sixth Patriarch tearing up the *Diamond Sūtra*. There is the story of the travelling monk who needed fuel because he was cold, and chopped up the wooden Buddha images in the temple at which he was staying. And there is the master who famously said to his disciple 'If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!'

These are all rather extreme, rather bizarre ways of underlining the same message: that Buddhism is only a means to an end. It is because

Buddhism has always been aware of the difference between means and ends that down the centuries it has remained spiritually alive. For the same reason, it has not on the whole been dogmatic or intolerant. It has never persecuted the followers of other religions, and the followers of one form of Buddhism have rarely persecuted the followers of another.

Other religions, it must frankly be said, are not really on a par with Buddhism in this respect. They do not always help the individual to become free. They do not really see themselves as a means to an end in the way that Buddhism does. The theistic religions are especially hampered in this respect. They have no critique of religion, whether transcendental or otherwise; they have no self-critique. It is therefore necessary that we apply the Buddhist critique to them, that we get Vimalakīrti to come along. And when we do this, we find only too often that other religions are not in fact means to the development of the individual at all. The critique perforce turns into a criticism.

Some people think that one should not criticize religions other than one's own, or even that one should not criticize religion at all. But such criticism is essential in revealing obstacles to one's development as an individual. It is only by means of a critique that we can ensure that the means to the development of the individual remains a means and does not harden into an end in itself.

We should therefore apply this critique, even this criticism, to everything that presents itself to us as religion. We should apply it to Christianity, apply it to Buddhism, apply it to the Hīnayāna, apply it to the Mahāyāna, apply it to the Vajrayāna. It is perhaps impressive that the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, a Mahāyāna text, shows up the imperfections of bodhisattvas. This does not happen in any of the other well-known Mahāyāna *sūtras*; perhaps it is one of the distinctive functions of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* to reveal the bodhisattvas' shortcomings. Of course, the bodhisattvas whose behaviour Vimalakīrti criticizes are not apparently archetypal bodhisattvas; perhaps they are novice bodhisattvas. And, as we shall see, Mañjuśrī, *the* archetypal bodhisattva, is shown as being almost perfect.

We need, of course, to make sure that we apply our critique appropriately; sometimes it is more appropriate to express appreciation. A guiding principle might be to apply the critique first and foremost to oneself. If we all applied this transcendental critique to our own spiritual practice, there would hardly be any need for a transcendental

critique of religion in general, or of our own religion in particular. We must be careful not to knock away the very ladder by which we are climbing – not, at least, until we are ready to do without it. We need to apply the critique to whatever practices we undertake – whether it is meditation or devotional practice, reading books or attending lectures, living in a community or working in a Right Livelihood business. We need to stay alive to the crucial question: is it helping me to develop? We should never allow any of these things to become ends in themselves; they are all means to an end. If we can remember this, we ourselves will be living embodiments of the reality of religion, and at the same time living embodiments of the transcendental critique of religion. Religion will then help us to become free. And then perhaps we will have at least a foretaste of the inconceivable emancipation.