

Vimalakirti and the Blue Lotus

This evening, I would like to talk about a flower and a famous lay practitioner. The flower is the blue lotus, and the lay practitioner is Vimalakirti.

We'll begin with Vimalakirti, a prominent lay follower of the Buddha who was recognized as a bodhisattva, an awakened being. He was an historical figure and contemporary of Gautama Buddha, not a symbolic character such as Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. In the Vimalakirti Sutra, he is recognized as the ideal Mahayana practitioner, noted for his profound understanding of the Buddha's teaching. Although a lay follower, Vimalakirti challenged the realization of Manjushri, the great Bodhisattva of Wisdom.

While Vimalakirti is understood to be an historical character, he was able to move through the various Buddha Fields of Buddhist cosmology. In Buddhist cosmology, there are many different kinds of worlds, called Buddha Fields. The Buddha Field that you and I are part of is Shakyamuni Buddha's "saha" world, a world of suffering. The word "saha" derives from a root word meaning "to bear" or "to endure." In this context the "saha" world describes the

land where Shakyamuni Buddha chose to make his appearance and to teach the path to end suffering.

In Vimalakirti's Sutra, we are introduced to another rather idyllic Buddha Field where a Buddha called Accumulation of Fragrances resides. In this world, everything has a wonderful aroma. Enlightenment can be realized simply by smelling this fragrance, no striving or effort is required.

In the sutra, Vimalakirti sends a messenger to the Buddha Field of Accumulation of Fragrances to ask if some of this marvelous, magic aroma might be brought to Shakamundi Buddha's Saha world, the realm of human beings. The Buddha of Accumulation of Fragrances finds he needs to explain the nature of Shakyamuni Buddha's world to his assembly, as a world where human beings must strive against greed, anger and delusion in order to find realization.

The members of the assembly ask that they might visit this difficult and corrupt world. When they arrive, Accumulation of Fragrances Buddha is shocked to see the condition of the saha world, where people are ignorant, selfish and difficult to teach. He asks Vimalikirti how the Shakyamuni Buddha manages to teach such beings.

Here is Shinshu Roberts translation of Vimalakirti's response:

“Vimalakirti goes on to explain that these very characteristics bring forth all of the good qualities in Shakyamuni's students. Shakyamuni, he tells them, has to take a rather blunt and strict stance to get through to his disciples, but this practice results in compassion, wisdom and skillful means. Once awakened, these bodhisattvas are firm in their vows, and they make great effort to enact compassionate means. When confronted with the needy, they respond with generosity; when confronted with evil, they respond with morality; when faced with anger, they are patient; when faced with foolishness, they respond with wisdom. These bodhisattvas' response to suffering makes them strong in practice, committed to compassion, and wise in their ability to sit in the midst of samsara. They are the blue lotuses blooming in fire.”

The blue lotus blooming represents a bodhisattva awakened, and it is dependent upon fire in order to flower. The blue lotus symbolizes both the compassion of Avaloketesvara as well as the wisdom of Manjushri. In his teaching called “Flowers of Emptiness,” Dogen says that “the time and the place that the blue lotus flowers open and spread are in the midst of fire and in the time of fire.”

Perhaps we are all familiar with the image of the lotus flower arising from the mud. The lotus flower is possibly the most common and widespread Buddhist symbol. At the end of each formal or oryoki meal at Ryumonji, the Ino chants:

In this world of Emptiness
May we exist in muddy water with purity like a lotus
Nothing surpasses the boundless mind
Thus we bow to Buddha.

The white lotus flower arising from muddy water symbolizes the purity of an enlightened mind arising amidst the suffering of the saha world. Although rooted in the mud, representing attachment and desire, the lotus flower with its long stalk, is unsullied by the mud below.

The blue lotus must come through fire, a more dramatic and demanding image than that of the white lotus. The blue lotus symbolizes practice realization arising from the testing and turmoil of a challenging world.

Dogen lived in a time of political uncertainty, cultural change and violent weather. The image of the blue lotus may have had great significance to his life, emerging from

his need to respond to the fire of samsara in his time. But Dogen saw all elements of the world being engaged in the awakening of Shakymuni's Buddha's Saha world. In his teaching entitled "Buddhanature," Dogen says:

Everything, both hidden and apparent, is sentient and is in the act of presencing with us, and we with them. It is the effort of all beings that enables our world to come into being. It is also the effort to bring forth enlightened action. This altruistic cooperation is the world worlding the world."

I suspect that most of us feel that we strive alone, either personally or as a species, to transform the suffering of the world. But Dogen challenges us to look beyond our lives to all sentient beings arising with us at this time in the saha world, as participants in bringing forth enlightenment.

This may sound like magic, or a primitive, anamistic claim, but I think that perhaps we have all encountered something of this when we have taken a walk outdoors at times when our minds are lost in confusion and turmoil. Have you found that when you are being tossed about by uncertainty, anger or frustration, if you just step out into the world beyond the confines of human structures and artifacts, you find ease? The world, the trees, the sunset,

the birds, come to you and offer themselves, simply that. You may not find an immediate answer, but the world gives you space, and space can itself be transformative. Coming to apprehend and appreciate the interdependence of awakening with all beings is why we practice and it is the force of our practice.

Shinshu Roberts, the author of *Being-Time, a Practitioner's Guide to Dogen's Shobogenzo Uji*, says:

Zazen is more than just the formal activity of sitting in meditation; it is also the embodiment of our interconnection...

The saha world is our zendo; our life is the cushion. Ultimately, the question we must ask ourselves is, "What or who will I be?" Am I striving to be the lotus in fire awakening in the saha world, able to respond with equanimity, wisdom and skillful means, or am I a person who is angry, polarized, distraught, fatalistic, and fearful? Can I find stability in a world of problems as I work with and transform my own difficulties?

We are, for better or worse, citizens of Shakyamuni's Saha world. We might wish that we were part of the Accumulation of Fragrances Buddha's Field, where one need only inhale a wondrous aroma to realize enlightenment. We might wish that we could live in a time

of less turmoil, better leadership, on a planet that is not threatened by rising carbon levels. But Vimalakirti tells us that it is our practice with these difficulties that results in compassion, wisdom and skillful means. The image of the blue lotus arising from the fire is the context of our practice, the engagement of our bodhisattva vow. Let this be our koan.

Resources:

Steadfast in the Midst of Samsara by Shinshu Roberts, Buddhadharma, The Practitioner's Quarterly, Spring 2020.

The Vimalakirti Sutra, Translated by Burton Watson, Columbia University Press, 1997.