

## VIMALAKIRTI'S DISCOURSE ON EMANCIPATION

### INTRODUCTION

THIS is an English translation of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* (Nanjiō 146), being the first attempt \* to introduce the text to Western readers. Strangely, no one has so far tried to translate it into any of the European languages—a book so full of interest in various ways and so largely contributing to the foundations of Oriental philosophy and religion.

The Sutra was probably first composed in Sanskrit or in some Indian dialect much earlier than the time of Nāgārjuna, which was in the second century A. D.; for it is frequently quoted by him in his commentary on the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (Nanjiō 1169). But how much earlier it was composed we have no means to ascertain; but there is no doubt that the compilation took place some centuries before Nāgārjuna, because it requires some considerable time for a Sutra to grow worthy of being quoted as a sacred authority.

King Asoka, a patron of Buddhism, who flourished in the third century B. C. and who was a great propagator of the faith throughout India even beyond the northern frontiers, over the Himalayan ranges, never mentions this Sutra; nor

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\* I did not know when I wrote these lines that an English translation by Mr. Kakichi Ōhara appeared in the *Hansei-Zasshi* for 1898-99, which is now extremely difficult to obtain. I have had so far no opportunity to read it, but the translator, I am told, was a young and sincere Buddhist who unfortunately died prematurely some fifteen years ago. Some passages from this Sutra are also translated in the *Outlines of Mahayan Buddhism*, London, 1907, by Prof. D. T. Suzuki, to which I have referred in the text. In any way, my translation, which was done quite independently, may be judged on its own merits.

does King Kanishka of the first century A. D. But there is no reason why we should deny the existence of the *Vimalakīrti* in those days simply from this fact, because there are in this Sutra remarkable characteristics which are quite different from those recognised as orthodox by these kings; for it is quite likely that they would ignore the canons of the other sects though such might have already been in actual existence.

We may however say, with some hesitation, that this Sutra existed already in the thought of lay-Buddhists, not in the circle of the monastic orthodoxy, at the times of these kings, to whom it seems to have remained quite unknown.

I now propose to point out what are some of the outstanding characteristics of the Sutra, which distinguish themselves from those of the Buddhist doctrine known to those kings.

(1) We see in this Sutra very frequently a phrase "the skilful means" \*; the full original meaning of which is difficult to reproduce in English except by this literal rendering, so dry and altogether inadequate. But this is to be made to include every legitimate practice issuing from a perfectly religious life. From the first chapter to the last we often meet also with a supernatural power which a Bodhisattva or a Buddha exercises. What does this supernatural power mean? It has no meaning by itself. If it had any at all it would be merely to please the ignorant and childish people, which is absurd and ridiculous in such a serious literature. The supernatural power exercised by the principal figures in this Sutra, is an indispensable expedient for leading beings to the realisation of the highest truth. The Mahayanistic ideals of a Bodhisattva are to sacrifice his own selfish happiness for a greater cause, and his efforts are concentrated in this self-sacrifice. He does not even extirpate his passions, quite

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\* *Upāya-Jaṇśālyā* in Sanskrit. *Upāya* means "coming near," "approach," "a means," or "expedient," and *Kauśālyā*, "cleverness," "skilfulness," or "expediency"; they are rendered in Chinese 善巧方便.

contrary to the ideal of the Hinayanists; for otherwise he could not feel any sympathy with the lower beings suffering from passions and deliver them from pain. He incarnates himself in any being, even in a medical herb (Chapter VIII) in order to save all beings and lead them to the higher stage of religious life. These sacrificial deeds are never or hardly known in the doctrine of the Hinayana.

(2) The Six Pāramitās, being the preliminary means for attaining Buddhahood, are never sought by the Hinayanists whose final goal is to become an Arhat; but in the present Sūtra most strongly emphasised are these Pāramitās. In fact they are one of the signs distinguishing Mahayana from Hinayana. Charity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom which are repeatedly taught in the text, form the highest standard of the religious life of a Bodhisattva. And we may take them as the standard ethical teachings even when they are interpreted in the modern sense.

(3) The great mercy and compassion towards all beings is most highly recommended in this Sūtra. They are cherished only by a Bodhisattva, who belongs to the Mahayana; but no Śrāvaka or Pratyeka-Buddha can cherish it inasmuch as he belongs to the Hinayana. A Śrāvaka or a Pratyeka-Buddha acts only for himself, not for others; his Nirvāna is a complete extinction which is the final goal to his life. But a Bodhisattva does not enter into Nirvāna for the sake of beings who suffer in this life, and whose salvation is his sole duty.

(4) Lastly, frequently this Sūtra makes reference to a certain mental outlook in which attachment finds no place. This state is beyond either words or thought (Chapter IX, etc.). In fact even the Hinayana speaks of freeing oneself from attachment, but to cling to a state of non-attachment is still an attachment, which is always condemned in this Sūtra. True non-attachment is absolute, it is not only free from all forms of attachment but free from non-attachment itself. Here is an absolute

freedom of the Bodhisattva in all his life-activities, and this is what has never been known to the Hinayanists.

All these characteristics above mentioned, which are never found in Hinayana Buddhism are products of "the Supreme Enlightenment" which is designated by the Mahayanists as "Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi"; and to cherish the thought which will lead to this enlightenment is the first step to be taken by all Mahayanists.

On the whole, what is most emphatically insisted upon in the Sutra before us is the practising of the life of a Bodhisattva as against that of a Śrāvaka or a Pratyeka-Buddha, that is to say, the Mahayana is strongly upheld against the Hinayana; the religion of laymen against the ascetic life of the monastery. The Fourfold Noble Truth, the Twelve Chains of Causation, and the Eightfold Right Path, which are found everywhere in the Buddhist teaching as preached in Ceylon or Burma, disappear in this Sutra, or at least they are presented in different forms, and in their place are taught the Fourfold Acceptance\* (*Samgraha*), the Ten Pāramitās, and the Thirty-Seven Requisites (*bodhipākaśhikā*) for Attaining Supreme Enlightenment. We can also point out how the human Gautama gradually gives way to a superhuman Buddha, who in turn assumes many forms—not as historical Buddhas who are said to have preceded Gautama Buddha, but as manifestations of the eternal truth (Chapter III). It is always the way with the Mahayana Sutra that an exceedingly long list of Buddhas is given, and that finally their number grows so enormously large—millions, trillions, or even equal to the sands of the Gaṅgā—that the individual naming is now quite impossible.

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\* "Acceptance" is not a good word for *Samgraha*, which primarily means "seizing," or "holding." In this case, it is to accept or receive kindly, or to have good understanding, and four modes of it are enumerated by Buddhists: 1. giving, 2. speaking kindly, 3. beneficent deeds, and 4. impartiality.

It shows how Buddhism developed in its ontology from the historical conception of one teacher to that of the Highest Being.

One thing however we should not overlook here, is that this Sutra has contributed much to the popularisation of Buddhism. We can imagine how, at the time of its appearance, the monks became corrupted, since they hid themselves behind the walls of their monastery, lost the influence and power which, owing to the virtue planted by the Buddha, they had exercised over the outside world. The lay-brothers of Buddhism were quite dissatisfied with this inactivity of the priests, and united themselves to take the scepter away from the monks now powerless in the propagation of a living faith. Religion ought not to be made the monopoly of the priests, but the possession of all who seek in earnest, either monks or laymen.

As the *Vimalakīrti* is a production of such a movement as started by the laity, Śāriputra, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, and Mahākāśyapa, who have always been considered the great disciples of Śākyamuni and the leaders of the priesthood, are now treated in this Sutra as miserable ignoramuses destitute of supernatural powers, which fact they themselves confess either by compulsion or on their own account.

It is due to this influence of the movement of the laity that, in Japan, Shōtoku Umayado (574-622), the crown prince of the Emperor Yōmei, who was a great patron of Buddhism, thought himself to be a Vimalakīrti, and wrote a commentary on this Sutra. He was never ordained as priest but did far more than a professional priest in propagating Buddhism in Japan, and even now many a layman following the example of this devout prince-Buddhist, takes pleasure in reading this Sutra above all others.

Besides, I wish to remind one fact in this connection, that in the history of Japan, there was a ceremony called the

Yuima-e, which was performed by order of the Imperial Court during certain periods of the Nara and the Heian reign. This was the ceremony of reciting the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-Sūtra*, Yuima being the Japanese pronunciation of Vimalakīrti. With reference to the origin of the ceremony, we are told that in the third year of the Empress Saimyō (A.D. 655-661) the chief minister Kamatari became ill, and Hōmyō, a nun who had come from Korea, persuaded the Empress to recite this Sutra for the recovery of the sick minister, saying that the Discourse originated in the sickness of Vimalakīrti and its recitation would be efficacious in the present case. The Empress, therefore, commanded this to be done, and Kamatari was restored to health even before the recitation was over. Then he as an act of gratitude began the ceremony of reciting the *Vimalakīrti* in the temple which he had erected as a thanksgiving offer to the Buddha. Since that time this became one of the chief ceremonies to be performed annually by order of the Court.

The Sanskrit text was lost a long time ago, and there is very little hope of discovering it; therefore the Chinese translations which were made directly from the original should be taken as the texts for a translation just as I have done now here. Fortunately the style is so simple that we can without much difficulty see through the Chinese texts what the original might have been, and to some extent we can reconstruct the original with ease.

The earliest Chinese translation was done in A.D. 188 by Yen-fo-tiao, 嚴佛調, of the Later Han dynasty, 漢, A.D. 25-220. It was called *Wei-Mo-Ching*, 維摩經, (in two volumes). But this is lost.

(2) The next translation in two volumes was done under the title, *Wei-Mo-Chieh-Ching*, 維摩詰經, by Chih-chien, 支謙, a layman of Wu dynasty, 吳, A.D. 222-280. This is extant.

(3) (4) The next two translations were produced during the Western Ts'in dynasty, 西晉, A. D. 265-316; one by Chu-shu-lan, 竺叔蘭, and the other by Dharmaraksha, 法護; they are in three volumes, respectively known as *Wei-Mo-la-chieh-ching*, 毘摩羅詰經, and *Wei-mo-chieh-so-shou-fa-men-ching*, 維摩詰所說法門經; but they are both lost.

When this latter translation of Dharmaraksha's was made, a compilation of these three translations mentioned above was done by Chih-min-tu, 支敏度; but it was also lost.

(5) In the Eastern Ts'in dynasty, 東晉, A. D. 317-420, it was also translated by Gitamitra, 祇多密, in four volumes under the title *Wei-mo-ching*, 維摩經, but it was also lost.

(6) The sixth translation came from the pen of Kumārajīva in three volumes, A. D. 406. This is the one most widely read and studied, and forms the text for the present English translation, while I did not neglect consulting the other translations wherever necessary.

(7) The seventh and the last translation in China is by Hsüan Tsang, 玄奘, of the T'ang dynasty, 唐, A. D. 618-907, entitled *Shuo-wu-kou-ch'êng-ching*, 說無垢稱經, in six volumes, still extant.

There is a Tibetan translation entitled as *Dri-ma-med-par-grags-pas-tstan-pa*, which is found in the fourteenth volume of the Sutra Collection designated as "Pha." Generally it agrees with the Chinese translations.

There was also a Kotanese translation, the fragments of which consisting of two folios are found in the Stein collections. They are said to be the beginning of the first chapter of this Sutra representing some stanzas therein. This identification was done by Prof. Leumann and Dr. Kaikyoku Watanabe. (*ZDMG*, XXII, for 1908.)

There are many commentators of this famous Sutra, and each of them strives to explain the text from the standpoint

of his own sect. Among them we mention the following:

- (1) *Chu-wei-mo*, 註維摩, (ten volumes) commentated by the translator Kumārajīva himself and his favourite disciples.
- (2) *I-su*, 義疏, (six volumes);
- (3) *Lüeh-su*, 略疏, (five volumes);
- (4) *Ching-ming Hsüan-lun*, 淨名玄論, (eight volumes);
- (5) *Yü-i*, 遊意.

The above works are by Chi-t'sang, 吉藏, of Sanron, 三論, sect.

- (6) *Kuang-su*, 廣疏, by Chi-i, 智愷, (twenty-eight volumes);
- (7) *Hsüan-i*, 玄義, by the same (six volumes);
- (8) *Lüeh-su*, 略疏, by Chan-jan, 湛然, (ten volumes);
- (9) *Su-chi*, 疏記, by the same, (three volumes).

These are from the standpoint of the Tendai, 天台, sect.

- (10) *Shuo-wu-kou-ch'êng-ching-tsan*, 說無垢稱經贊, by K'uei-chi, 窺基, (six volumes). K'uei-chi was one of the favourite pupils of Hsüan T'sang, and accordingly his commentary was done on the newly translated text of his master's from the standpoint of the Hossō sect. It is the only commentary left to us on Hsüan T'sang's text.

Later on in the Sung, 宋, and the Ming, 明, dynasty we have:

- (11) *Wu-wo-su*, 無我疏, by Ch'uan-têng, 傳燈, (twelve volumes),
- (12) *Ping-chu*, 評註, by Yang-ch'ih-yüan, 楊起元, (fourteen volumes).

In Japan, Umayado, 厩戸皇子, the crown prince to the Emperor Yomei, wrote a commentary. It is called,

- (13) *Yuimakyō-gisho*, 維摩經義疏, in three volumes.

Gyōnen, 凝然, A. D. 1240-1321, a famous priest, wrote a commentary on this Umayado's commentary. It is entitled,

- (14) *Yuimakyō-sho-anraki*, 維摩經疏菴羅記, (forty volumes).



Hōtan, 鳳潭, A.D. 1654-1738, another learned priest, writes a commentary on Kumārajīva's commentary designated as

(15) *Hotsumōshō*, 發蒙抄, (five volumes).

This list by no means exhausts all the commentaries that are still in existence.

I have referred already to Nāgārjuna who quoted this Sutra frequently in his work; and other scholars such as Bhāvaviveka, Candrakīrti, and Dharmakīrti also very often quote this Sutra in their commentaries on *Madhyamaka Śāstras*.

There is a book called the *Śikshāsamuccaya* by Śāntideva of the eleventh century, a compendium of the earlier Buddhist Mahayana Sutras, edited by Professor C. Bendall in the "Bibliotheca Buddhica," Vol. I. Petrograd, 1897. It contains a few passages from this Sutra in the original Sanskrit form. As they are scattered throughout the *Śikshāsamuccaya*, they are all collected in the appendix for a review. They show how little they differ from the corresponding passages in my translation. This fact may help us to decide upon the degree of accuracy attained by the Chinese translator as regards the text in general. Recently Professor Rouse published the translation of the *Śikshāsamuccaya* in London, 1922; The corresponding passages are also referred to in the following translation.

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