

146 - The Transcendental Critique of Religion

Mr Chairman and Friends.

What is it that as individuals we need more than anything else in life, that is to say once such basic needs as food, clothing, shelter and leisure have been met, have been satisfied. We need freedom, freedom, and it is not difficult I think to see why this is so. The real meaning of human life; as I think we gathered by this time, the real meaning of human life is to be found in growth, in development. Development that is to say of self-awareness, of emotional positivity, of responsibility for oneself and for others, and also development of creativity. In other words, it consists in the development of all our more distinctively human qualities and characteristics. It means, we may say, the development of - or development into - higher and higher levels of being and consciousness. But we cannot grow unless we have the space in which to grow, both literally and also metaphorically. We cannot develop unless we have the room in which to develop. In a word we need freedom. We need freedom from all that restricts and confines us - not only outside us but also even inside us. We need freedom from our own conditioning, need even freedom from our own old self. Now, what is it that helps us or is usually considered to help us to be free, to become free - apart that is to say from our own personal efforts. What helps us to become free, what is considered at least to help us to become free, what is considered at least to help us to become free is what is usually called - not a very satisfactory term admittedly as we shall see later on - what is usually called 'Religion'.

Religion is concerned with freedom, concerned with the freedom of the individual, concerned with the freedom of the individual to grow, to develop. And in the course of our first talk - as I think most of you remember - we saw that an alternative title of our sutra, The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa, was 'The Achintya Vimoksa' or the Inconceivable Emancipation which we could also translate as liberation or freedom. We saw in fact in the course of that first talk that 'Vimoksa' - emancipation, liberation, freedom - was one of a group of terms that was very important in and for early Buddhism, very prominent in and for early Buddhism. We saw - just briefly reminding you - that in addition to 'Vimoksa' or 'vimokkha' which is the Pali form of the word - we have terms like 'mutti' and 'vimutti', as well as 'mokkha', and they've all got the same general sense, that is to say they all signify, they all connote emancipation, freedom. And we further saw this sort of experience - the experience of spiritual emancipation is very, very important for early Buddhism. In fact, we saw that it is what the Buddha's teaching is really all about. We saw, that in a well known passage, the Buddha himself says 'Just as the great ocean has one taste, the taste of salt; so my teaching has one taste, one flavour, the taste, the flavour of emancipation: 'Vimutti'. So the goal of the spiritual life is envisaged in early Buddhism, in fact in Buddhism generally, in terms of emancipation; emancipation from craving, from hatred, delusion; emancipation from everything that conditions, confines and distorts our own deeper sources of creativity, our own creative impulse. It's the emancipation of ourselves, we may say, from all that prevents us from becoming even Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; emancipation from all that stands in the way of our growth. And in that first talk, in the course of that first talk, I went on to illustrate in some detail the importance of the conception of emancipation in Buddhism - there is no need to recapitulate all that here. It's sufficiently clear that, so far as Buddhism is concerned, Religion is what helps us to become free.

Now I have spoken so far only about Buddhism. But if we were to ask the followers of any other religions, where they stand, where those other religions stand in that respect, they will surely say they too helped the individual to become free; that is to say if we ask the followers of what I've called the universal religions. The Christian if you ask him that sort of question, might quote from the Bible, from the New Testament, might quote the words 'You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free'. But now let us ask another question. What is it that hinders us from becoming free, actually becoming free? - apart from that is to say our own sloth and torpor, laziness, neglect, forgetfulness and so on? Well, what hinders us from becoming free is religion. So here we encounter a gigantic contradiction; we encounter a gigantic paradox. Religion which is supposed to help us to become spiritually free in fact only too often helps to keep us enslaved. In fact only too often religion adds to our existing state of slavery; so much indeed is this the case that, to quite a lot of people, the idea, the very idea that religion helps us to become free sounds quite absurd, because they just can't associate religion and freedom at all, and for this reason quite a lot of people feel at least a little uncomfortable using - in a sense being obliged to use - this word religion at all. In fact I must confess that I sometimes feel a little uncomfortable using it myself but so far I haven't succeeded in finding any term to replace it, but I'm working on it.

So, why is it that we find it so difficult to associate religion and freedom - we in the West that is, I should hasten to add. It is not perhaps so much because of what religion is in principle, it's because of what we find when we look at it as a concrete historical fact, a concrete historical phenomenon; especially when we look back at the record of Christianity over the last 1,900 Years or perhaps I should be a wee bit generous and say, last 1,600 years. That is to

say back to the time when Christianity was declared the official religion of the Roman Empire. It's fairly obvious that it isn't possible for us to develop as individuals unless we are free at least to think for ourselves. But organised Christianity has hardly ever allowed the individual that freedom; certainly none of the major churches has ever allowed it. People in the past, in the West in all Christian lands had to think as the Church thought; they had to tow the theological line or else. I need hardly remind you that even today what the Church calls blasphemy is still a criminal offence in this country. Not only that, organised Christianity not only refused to allow the individual to think for himself, it obliged him to think in a way that was actually detrimental, actually inimical to his own personal development, obliged him to think of himself as a miserable sinner, obliged him to think of himself as weak and powerless; obliged him to think of such things as independence and initiative as wrong, if not positively sinful. And again I hardly need remind you that many of us suffered as individuals from the effect of this sort of teaching.

Now, what went wrong? How was it that religion that is meant to help us become free should in fact more often than not do the exact opposite? How is it that religion should help actually to enslave us? It's because it has been forgotten that religion is a means to an end - that end being the development of the individual. Religion has become an end in itself. The forms which religion takes have become ends in themselves; doctrines have become ends in themselves; institutions have become ends in themselves and rules have become ends in themselves. So what are we to do in a situation of this sort. The individual needs to grow. To be an individual means in fact to grow. The individual needs to become free; the individual needs something that will help him grow, help him become free. So, alright let us agree to call that thing 'religion' but how are we to make sure that religion does not become the means or a means of enslaving the individual, or stultifying the individual, even of crushing the individual? We need something that will constantly remind us of the limitations of religion, we need something that will constantly remind us that religion is only a means to an end. That end being, as I've said, the development of the individual. The individual's means of development from a state of unenlightened to a state of enlightened humanity; from mundane consciousness to transcendental consciousness. In other words we need what I have called 'the transcendental critique of religion'. And we find such a critique in *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*; we find it in chapters three and four. And in Thurman's translation these chapters are entitled: "The disciple's reluctance to visit Vimalakirti and the Bodhisattva's reluctance".

You may recall from the last talk that Vimalakirti is sick and he's sick out of skilful means, sick out of great compassion, and many people come to visit him, come to enquire after his health; they are all laymen and he teaches them. So far we saw in greater detail last week.

Now, at the beginning of chapter three, we find Vimalakirti at home, in his own room lying on his bed and, as he lies there, a thought passes through his mind. or perhaps we should say, he allows a thought to pass through his mind because after all, he's a very advanced Bodhisattva you may recollect. And what is that thought; the thought is 'I am sick, lying on my bed in pain; yet the Tathagata, the saint, the perfectly accomplished Buddha does not consider me or take pity upon me and sends no one to enquire after my illness.' Now where was the Buddha all this time; the Buddha was staying in Amrapali's garden on the outskirts of the city of Vaisali and he was teaching the great assembly of Arahats, Bodhisattvas and others. And the Buddha, even as he was sitting there, even as he was teaching, he knew the thought that was passing through Vimalakirti's mind. We may say, it's as though a sort of game, a little game was being played between the two, Vimalakirti and the Buddha, because, after all, Vimalakirti was not really sick and presumably the Buddha must have known that too. At least, Vimalakirti was not sick in the ordinary sense, presumably the Buddha knew that too. So, the Buddha was quite happy, so to speak to play his part in this game; he was quite happy to 'play ball' as we say. So what does the Buddha do - knowing this thought that is passing through Vimalakirti's mind - he says 'Sariputra' (in the Mahayana sutras, of course, it is always poor old Sariputra!) 'please go and enquire after the illness of Vimalakirti' or, as we would say, go and enquire after his health; there is an interesting difference of idiom here.

Sariputra is of course one of the two leading monk disciples of the Buddha, the other being Mahamoggallana. Sariputra of course is an Arahata, he has gained individual emancipation, emancipation, that is to say, for himself alone. In a sense he is liberated; at least liberated from the ordinary passions, liberated from conditioned existence. But what does he say when asked to go and see Vimalakirti, what does Sariputra say? He says, 'I am reluctant to go'; a more literal translation would be, a quite literal translation would be 'I am not very keen on going!' He does not actually refuse to go because, after all, it is the Buddha who is asking him to go; but he would much rather not go and he explains why. He says that one day, he was sitting at the foot of a tree in the forest - as good monks are supposed to do or at least were in ancient India - and he was absorbed, he says, in contemplation, deeply absorbed in contemplation. And suddenly, Vimalakirti came along and he said: 'that's not the way to absorb yourself in

contemplation' and he proceeded to explain what absorption in contemplation really was and the explanation was so profound that Sariputra was left dumb-founded; he was quite unable to reply, he says, he remained silent. And this is why he is unwilling to go and ask Vimalakirti about his illness, he had some experience of Vimalakirti before. He is not very keen on encountering him again. So the Buddha tries again (probably The Buddha is quite enjoying this little game!) The Buddha asks Mahamoggallana to go; but strange to say Mahamoggallana is also reluctant because he too has had some experience of Vimalakirti. One day he says he was teaching the Dharma to some householders and Vimalakirti came along and he told Mahamoggallana how the Dharma should really be taught to householders and Mahamoggallana also was left dumbfounded.

In this way, the Buddha asks all the great Arahats disciples to go; he asks Mahakasyapa, he asks Subhuti, he asks Purna, he asks Katyayana, he asks Aniruddha, he asks Upali, he asks Rahula, he asks Ananda; but one-and-all they are reluctant to go, they have all some previous experience of dear old Vimalakirti. He has exposed the spiritual shortcomings of all of them. He has exposed the spiritual shortcomings of the Hinayana, taken literally. He has exposed the spiritual shortcomings of the Hinayana taken as an end in itself. So what does the Buddha do? He turns to the Bodhisattvas who are also in the great assembly, also in the congregation and He asks Maitreya to go and inquire about Vimalakirti's illness. Maitreya of course is the leading Bodhisattva, he is, (perhaps I should say for the benefit of those who perhaps have not been before) a Bodhisattva is one who has dedicated himself to supreme, perfect Enlightenment for the benefit of all. And Maitreya, as the leading Bodhisattva, as the future Buddha, at present, according to Buddhist tradition, resides in the Tushita devaloka, the Tushita heaven, the contented heaven, and he is waiting for the time to come for him to descend to earth for his last life; that is to say the life in which he will gain himself supreme, perfect Enlightenment as a Buddha. But even he, even Maitreya, is reluctant to go because he too has encountered Vimalakirti. He says that one day, he was talking to the gods of the Tushita heaven and they were talking about the stage of non-

regression of the great Bodhisattvas; that is to say the stage of no falling backwards - I can assure you is a very advanced stage indeed. Vimalakirti came along and he said: "Maitreya, the Buddha had prophesied that after one more birth, you will attain supreme perfect Enlightenment; but what is the nature of that birth? Is it really past, present or future?" And he goes on to show with great dialectical skills that it cannot be any of these; it cannot be past, it cannot be present, cannot be future. He shows in fact that the notion of birth itself is self contradictory; he shows that the notion of birthlessness is also self contradictory; he shows that there is no such thing as non regression; no such a thing as the attainment of Enlightenment - not in reality - no such thing as Enlightenment itself at all. He shows that there is no such a thing as 'Maitreya' (!), no such thing as a future Buddha! It is not surprising that Maitreya too was rendered speechless.

He is therefore reluctant to go to Vimalakirti and inquire about his illness. So the Buddha asks Prabhavyuha to go, but Prabhavyuha has had a similar experience. One day he just happens to meet Vimalakirti so Vimalakirti asked him where he was coming from - apparently quite a simple and innocent question. So Prabhavyuha replied that he was coming from 'Bodhimanda'; so 'Bodhimanda' means the place of Enlightenment, in other words he said he was coming from Buddhagaya where the Buddha gained supreme perfect Enlightenment and in particular coming from the 'Vajrasana', the so called diamond throne on which the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree at Buddhagaya when He gained Enlightenment. So that's where he was coming from he said. So Vimalakirti had thereupon explained to him at some length what the 'Bodhimanda' really was; he explained that it was not a place at all but a state of mind; he explained that it's something from which there is no question of the Bodhisattva coming at all because he's in it all the time, everything that he does is an expression of it. So not unnaturally Prabhavyuha too was rendered speechless. So he too is reluctant to go to Vimalakirti; he doesn't particularly want another dose of the same medicine. So in this way, the Buddha asks all the great Bodhisattvas to go; He asks Jagatimdharma, asks Sudatta, but they too had their own experiences of Vimalakirti, they too are unwilling to go. In the end the Buddha asks Manjusri - Manjughosa, the Bodhisattva of wisdom himself, to go but that is another story as they say. And what that story is we shall be seeing in our next talk, the week after next. Meanwhile, Vimalakirti has exposed the spiritual shortcomings of Maitreya and the rest; he's exposed the spiritual shortcomings of the Mahayana taken literally, he has exposed the spiritual shortcomings of the Mahayana taken as an end in itself.

So what does Vimalakirti represent here; it is quite easy I think to see what he represents. But it's not so very easy to put it into words. We could say that Vimalakirti represents truth or reality itself devoid of all concepts, and that will do provided we don't take it too literally, provided we don't let the phrases roll off our tongue too glibly. We could say that Vimalakirti represents the Enlightenment experience itself and what is it that happens when our partial spiritual experiences are brought in contact with truth or reality itself? What is it that happens when the means to Enlightenment are brought in contact with the Enlightenment experience itself? What happens when our

doctrines, our institutions, our rules, are brought into contact with it? What happens is that their limitations are revealed and this can be a very painful experience. Indeed, it can be a very traumatic experience; painful that is to say, traumatic that is to say for those who identify themselves with their own partial spiritual experiences, who derive in fact their emotional security from them, from that identification, because it means that their own limitations are revealed and this can be a very shattering experience. So Vimalakirti is like a high voltage current of electricity: you touch him at your peril except of course that you don't touch him, he comes along and touches you. In traditional terms, Vimalakirti is like a great vajra, that is to say a great thunderbolt, a great diamond; he is powerful, he is incisive; 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.

I am reminded at this point of a film I saw some years ago; this might help to give us a little illustration. The film - I think, it was Passolini's "Theorem" - some of you, some of our older friends perhaps, may remember it! In this film as far as I can remember - my recollection may not be perfectly correct - a young salesman, in fact a rather attractive young salesman, spends the weekend with a middle class Italian family. It's an Italian film of course. It seems, it transpires, that he has some business with the father of the family who apparently is the head of some industrial firm or industrial project or other. And the family consists of father, mother, grown up son, grown up daughter and not so young maid servant. Now in the course of the weekend the young man manages to have affairs with all of them and the rest of the film shows the results of their contact with him. The mother becomes a nymphomaniac; the daughter has a nervous breakdown (you see her being taken away in an ambulance, a large white ambulance, to a mental hospital); the son who is an artist destroys all his paintings; the maid servant becomes a nun and works miracles. In the last scene the father is shown walking through a crowded railway station slowly taking off all his clothes! The critics I remember had quite a gala 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 symbolised reality and some said that they thought he was being himself!

So you can take your choice, but whatever that choice may be, there is no doubt that the impact of reality in any form has a shattering, has a devastating effect on our lives, and this is what we find is happening in the two chapters of The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa. It's happening of course much more positively than it happened apparently in the film and happening on a very much higher level. But the result is that the disciple of the Bodhisattva concerned is left dumbfounded we are told. And Thurman - the American translator - has an interesting comment here. He says 'he' - that is to say the disciple or Bodhisattva - "is overwhelmed and speechless, yet intuitively recognised the rightness of Vimalakirti's strictures; - he can neither accept them and put them into practice nor reject them outright." So this is very significant: "He can neither accept them and put them into practice nor reject them outright." And this is perhaps very much our own experience sometimes on our own level of development. Perhaps our kalyana mitra, our good friend, our spiritual friend tells us something; something about ourselves. Something we have not noticed before, or perhaps it's something about the Dharma. So what is our initial reaction to this new knowledge, this revelation as it were? We feel stunned; we feel stupefied. We are forced to recognise the truth of what has been said but we are quite unable to do anything about it because it takes time to adjust to the new knowledge, it takes time to get used to it; it takes time for us to start putting it into practice. So it's not surprising that the disciples and Bodhisattvas are reluctant to meet Vimalakirti, it's not surprising they are not very keen on going. It's not surprising, we may say, that the partial experience should be reluctant to experience the total experience; it is not surprising that the means to Enlightenment should be reluctant to encounter Enlightenment itself. The experience is too painful; too traumatic.

But we should be on our guard against a possible misunderstanding here. The experience may be painful, may even be traumatic but it is not a negative thing; in fact it's a highly positive thing. The purpose of Vimalakirti's strictures is not to humiliate the disciples or Bodhisattvas; he is not just putting them down as we say. His purpose, his deep, ultimate purpose is to help them to grow. His purpose is to help them to move on from their present partial experience, from their present relatively limited outlook. And I say relatively limited because after all they are Arahats and Bodhisattvas. In the same way, the purpose of the transcendental critique of religion is not to destroy religion, its purpose rather is to restore religion; to restore it to its true function - its function of being a means to an end. That means being of course always 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 religion, essential to its very existence. It must accompany it all the time. It's important to understand this; it is important perhaps to understand it in detail. So let us look a little more closely at the encounters of some of the disciples and Bodhisattvas with Vimalakirti. Let us look at the encounters of the disciples Purna, Uppali, Rahula and Ananda, and the Bodhisattva Jagatimdhara

Purna was teaching the Dharma when his encounter took place; he was teaching some young monks in the forest. He was apparently teaching them the Hinayana doctrine. Along came Vimalakirti and he said that Purna was teaching them wrongly; he said the monks were capable of following the Mahayana which was a higher teaching. Now, Vimalakirti was not criticising Purna simply for teaching the Hinayana instead of the Mahayana. After all as we have seen he was quite capable of exposing the limitations of the Mahayana too considered as an end in itself. He was criticising Purna for teaching the Dharma without being able to see what the actual spiritual needs of the young monks were. He was criticising him, we may say, for teaching the Dharma mechanically. He said: "Reverend Purna, first concentrate yourself, regard the minds of these young Bhikkhus and then, teach the Dharma". And again, he said: "Without examining the spiritual faculties of living beings, do not presume upon the one-sidedness of their faculties." And further on: "The disciples who do not know the thoughts and inclinations of others are not able to teach the Dharma to anyone." That's a pretty strong statement. So Vimalakirti is criticising Purna for not being in real contact with the people he is teaching, for not being in communication with them. Purna has got a fixed idea about the Dharma; he thinks apparently it is this and that particular teaching; this and that conceptual formulation, and it's this that he puts across regardless, regardless of whether it will actually help anyone to develop.

We find Eastern Buddhist teachers doing this when they come to the West. They've learned something in the East and they think all they've got to do is to repeat it in the West. They don't take the trouble to get to know people in the West. They don't bother sometimes to have any real contact with them. So they are unable to communicate - unable to communicate the Dharma. They usually don't stay long enough to get to know people anywhere. So, what Vimalakirti's criticism really means is that teaching the Dharma is a means of helping people to develop. So, one cannot therefore really teach it without being aware of people, without being aware of their spiritual needs. He is not criticising Purna of course for teaching the dharma, he is criticising him for teaching it in the wrong way; he is criticising him for regarding the teaching of the Dharma as an end in itself.

I had once or twice my own experience of this sort of thing in India; I was actually asked to teach the Dharma in the wrong way. Well you might be wondering how on earth that happened; well, it happened in Calcutta. At one time, quite a few years ago but for several years on end, I used to give lectures in a certain Buddhist hall, in Calcutta; usually on full moon days and hundreds of people used to come - mostly Bengali Buddhists - and there would be quite a lot of noise; in fact everybody would be shouting and talking and screaming at the same time. And eventually on one occasion the noise became so bad that I complained to the head monk who happened to be from Ceylon. And I said that there was so much noise that nobody could hear what I was saying. So the head monk said: "It doesn't matter if nobody can hear what you're saying, we just want you to lecture on the Dharma." ! In other words, a lecture on the Dharma had become part of the ritual; someone just had to be seen giving it, it didn't matter if nobody could hear him; it did not matter whether anybody understood what he was saying or not; the whole thing had become quite meaningless. So in this way, I was actually asked to teach the Dharma in the wrong way. But this is a rather extreme form - I was almost going to say even for India - of the sort of thing that Vimalakirti was getting at on that particular occasion.

So now for Upali's encounter. Upali being - some of you may remember - the expert in the Vinaya or monastic law. Two monks had committed an offence, an offence against the monastic rule and they were ashamed to appear before the Buddha so they went instead to Upali and they asked him to remove their anxieties by accepting their confession and their promise not to commit the offence again; that being the regular monastic procedure. Upali then gave them what the text calls 'a religious discourse'. At this point Vimalakirti came along and he said that Upali was only making matters worse; he said: "Reverend Upali, do not aggravate further the sins of these two monks without perplexing them, relieve their remorse; reverend Upali, 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." Vimalakirti says quite a lot more of a quite metaphysical nature but this particular quote is enough for our present purpose. Now, why does Vimalakirti say that Upali is only making matters worse; what is he getting at; 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 to say they've broken a rule. But why in the first place was the rule laid down? It was laid down in order to help the individual - in this case the individual monk - to develop, to evolve. So what does it mean when the two monks break the rule? It means that they failed to develop; it means that they may even have regressed. So, what should Upali be careful to do in the circumstances? What he's really got to do is to get them developing again. He should not be concerned simply with the fact that they have broken a rule because that would be treating the rule as an end in itself; he should be mainly be concerned - Vimalakirti is implying - with getting them back onto the right path. But when we treat the rule as an end in itself, what happens? That is to say, what happens when you break the rule - if you treat the rule as an end in

itself? Well, what happens is that sin comes into existence and we then waste time worrying about that sin and how to get rid of it instead of getting on with the task of one's individual development. So, Vimalakirti says 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 totally non-existent; it's a mere concept, it's a mere word. This will, of course, be very welcome news for the ex-Christian, that is to say the ex-Christian as distinct from the non-Christian. After all, just look again at the situation. Suppose you do do something wrong, something opposed to your own development. Well what has happened? You've hindered your own development. So, what must you do? Well, first you must understand what you've done; secondly, you must feel regret - especially if it has involved injury to another person; thirdly, you must resolve not to do that particular thing again and, fourthly, you must take steps to ensure that in future you do what is right. In other words what will help you to develop as an individual. The question of sin does not come into it at all. So, that's why Vimalakirti says "living beings are afflicted by the passions of thought and they are purified by the purification of thought"; sin doesn't come into it at all. But suppose, but suppose you believe in God; suppose you believe that God has laid down certain rules, certain laws, certain commandments, then if you break one of those rules, what happens? Sin comes into existence; and when sin comes into existence, what do you feel? You feel guilt; what do you also feel, you feel fear, you feel fear of punishment. So, when sin comes into existence, what do you need? You need someone to save you from the consequences of your sin, you need a saviour. And this of course, all this, is what is known as religion in the West. The situation is actually more complicated than this because sin came into existence before we were even born; it came into existence when Adam and Eve, we are told, disobeyed God and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so we inherit that sin; we are born in sin. So, we can begin to understand perhaps why the Christian and the ex-Christian is psychologically in such a mess. We can see perhaps why it's important not to regard rules as ends in themselves; perhaps we can understand the point of Vimalakirti's strictures on Upali.

Next we come to Rahula's encounter. Many young Licchavi gentlemen we are told had come to see him. They'd asked him why he had renounced a kingdom of a universal monarch; don't forget he was, Rahula was, the Buddha's son and his grand-father's heir provisionally after The Buddha himself had left the kingdom. And these young Licchavi gentlemen, they asked Rahula why he had left the world. So, Rahula was explaining to them on that occasion the benefits and virtues of renouncing the world. And Vimalakirti of course came along; he said that Rahula was explaining the matter all wrong. He said "Renunciation is itself the very absence of virtues and benefits. Reverend Rahula, one may speak of benefits and virtues in regard to compounded things--but renunciation is un-compounded and there can be no question of benefits and virtues in regard to the un-compounded." (He says a lot more but this is the key sentence.) So, what does it mean? It means that renunciation is essentially a spiritual thing, a spiritual activity; leaving the world is essentially a spiritual activity. It's not a matter of gaining even benefits and virtues - but of growing. The young men however still don't understand and they say "We have heard the Tathagata" - that's is to say the Buddha - "declares that one should not renounce the world without the permission of one's parents". In other words, they're still thinking in terms of a formal leaving of the world, they're still thinking in terms of becoming a monk in a literal sense, in the technical sense. So Vimalakirti simply 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." In other words, he returns to his point more emphatically than ever; his point that renunciation is essentially a spiritual activity. It consists in the development of the Bodhicitta, it consists, as we more often say, in the going for refuge, it consists in an actual commitment to the Three Jewels. Formal, external leaving of the world is not an end in itself; becoming a monk in the literal sense, the technical sense is not an end in itself. Vimalakirti is not saying that formal leaving of the world is not necessary; he is not saying that becoming a monk in the literal sense, in the technical sense, is not necessary. He is only saying that the outer action is of value only to the extent that it is the expression of an inner attitude. One is not a monk, that is to say one who has supposedly renounced the world simply because one is wearing a yellow robe. In the FWBO, we sometime say: "Commitment is primary, life-style is secondary." But this can be seriously misunderstood. It doesn't mean it doesn't matter how you live; it doesn't mean that any old life-style would do; it doesn't mean that lifestyle be detached from, dissociated from commitment. It doesn't mean that one's lifestyle is a matter of indifference. When we say that lifestyle is secondary, we mean that it is the expression of one's commitment, not the commitment itself.

Now, for Ananda's encounter with Vimalakirti. Ananda was of course the personal attendant and companion during the latter part of his, the Buddha's, life. And he had much close contact with the Buddha naturally; perhaps, according to tradition at least, he was a little bit attached to the Buddha as a person. But one day, it seems the Buddha was unwell and he needed some milk. So, Ananda took his begging bowl and went to the mansion of a great Brahmin family to beg for milk, and Vimalakirti came along and he asked Ananda what he was doing there so early in the morning. So Ananda said: "The body of the Lord manifests some indisposition and he needs some

milk, therefore I've come to fetch some." Vimalakirti then scolded Ananda for saying this, and the gist of his remark which is rather metaphysical, the gist of his remark was that the Buddha was not to be identified with his physical body, as Ananda seems to be doing. The Buddha, he said, was to be identified, if with anything, then with the Dharmakaya - the body of truth, the body of reality; the physical body of the Buddha was not an end in itself, so to speak. When you have seen the physical body of the Buddha, you shouldn't think you have seen the Buddha himself; the Buddha is essentially the enlightened mind. Nevertheless, the Buddha does in a sense have a body, at least for a while. Therefore, a voice from the sky tells Ananda not to be ashamed; it says that the Buddha has appeared during the time of the five corruptions and he disciplines living beings by acting lowly and humble, suggesting that he's only pretending to be ill, just like Vimalakirti. So therefore Ananda should go and get the milk. The metaphysical implications of Vimalakirti's remarks are quite profound but there is no time to go into them now. The general meaning of this episode is quite clear. The Buddha is not to be identified with the physical body. The individual even is not to be identified with his physical body; the physical body is not an end in itself; the physical body is a means to enlightenment.

Lastly, we come to the Bodhisattva Jagatimdhara's encounter with Vimalakirti, or part of it. Jagatimdhara happened to be at home one day and, while he was at home, a wonderful thing happened; he had a visit, an unexpected visit, an extraordinary visit, he had a visit from Mara, the evil one. Mara did not come as Mara, of course, Mara never does; he came disguised as Indra, the king of the gods; that is to say the gods of the highest heaven of the desire realm. And he came, believe it or not, surrounded by 12,000 heavenly maidens, and they all approached Jagatimdhara with the sounds of music and singing - choral singing. Perhaps we can just imagine the scene, we can just imagine the glorious figure of the king of the gods in a blaze of light, decked with jewels - king of gods as he seems to be - and then, the 12,000 beautiful heavenly maidens in all sorts of silks and jewels, very elegant with their hair floating down their backs, and all that wonderful music and wonderful singing of all of them together. It probably sounded just like Monteverdi's Vespers! And then, Mara saluted Jagatimdhara, he saluted him, the king of the gods as he seemed to be, saluted Jagatimdhara very, very meekly, very humbly and he touched, he went to the extreme of touching Jagatimdhara's feet with his head, and he stood very respectfully to one side. So Jagatimdhara was completely taken in by this - we usually are; he thought he really was the king of the gods, so he rose to the occasion, he delivered a little sermon - I think we can call it that - a sermon suitable for a god, a sermon on impermanence. So then what did Mara say? Mara was deeply moved by this sermon apparently and he wanted to show his gratitude. So he said: "Good sir, accept from me these 12,000 divine maidens and make them your servants." Now, Jagatimdhara may have been a bit of a fool but he wasn't a complete fool! So, he declined the offer; he said that heavenly maidens were not suitable for someone like himself; that is to say someone who has taken up the higher spiritual life. At this point, along came Vimalakirti and he really exposed the situation, exposed what was going on. He said to Jagatimdhara: "You think that this is Indra, but it is not Indra, it is Mara." So Vimalakirti functions just like your good spiritual friend. Vimalakirti then said to Mara: "Since Jagatimdhara is unable to accept the heavenly maidens, give them to me." Mara became terrified. Well, even the disciples and Bodhisattvas were reluctant to meet Vimalakirti, so you can guess how Mara felt. He tried to get away quick but it was no use; in the end he had to hand over all 12,000 heavenly maidens, and he did so very reluctantly! So what did Vimalakirti do with the 12,000 heavenly maidens - you may really be wondering; these 12,000 heavenly maidens were of course Mara's daughters in disguise. So, what did Vimalakirti do? He taught them, he taught them to develop the Bodhicitta, that is to say the will to supreme perfect enlightenment for the benefit of all. Well that is not the end of the episode because Mara tries to get his daughters back but he is not very successful. However, we have seen enough of this particular encounter for our purpose, we won't go into it further.

So what does it mean? It means that rejection is not enough; it means that asceticism is not an end in itself. After all, what do Mara's daughters represent? What do the heavenly maidens represent? They represent the emotions, they represent the passions, they represent them in their relatively crude and relatively refined forms. So, one who has taken up the higher spiritual life should not succumb to them, he should certainly have them well under control and this stage is represented, this stage of development is represented, by the Bodhisattva Jagatimdhara. His name, significantly perhaps, means 'Ruler of the world'. But control, conscious control is not the last word in spiritual life; rejection is not the last word in spiritual life, the emotions have to be converted, they have to be transformed, they have to be transmuted, they have to contribute their energies to the spiritual life and this stage is represented by Vimalakirti.

According to Thurman, the American translator of the text, there is a Tantric element in The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa, especially in this passage, and this may well be so. But we should be very careful not to misunderstand, we should not think, we should never think we are accepting Mara's daughters like Vimalakirti when we are only succumbing to them like an ordinary person. The stage represented by Jagatimdhara is one that most of us will have to be in for

a very long time, assuming we can reach it that is. In the long run, it is not an end in itself, it's only a means to an end.

So, we have now taken our closer look at the encounters of some of the disciples and Bodhisattvas with Vimalakirti and the main point should now be quite clear. The Hinayana is a means to an end, the Mahayana 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 development of the individual, the spiritual development of the individual. None of these things is an end in itself. So what helps us to remember this, that all these things, that religion in particular is an end in itself, what helps us to remember this is what I've called the 'The transcendental critique of religion' and it is this that we find in The Vimalakirti Nirveda, especially in the two chapters with which we have been concerned tonight. Now, Buddhism always had this sort of critique, in fact it is a part of Buddhism. Buddhism has always been aware that it's only a means to an end, in fact it has always announced itself as such. You may recollect the Buddha's parable of the raft; the Buddha said: "I teach you the Dharma under the figure of a raft as something to leave behind you, not to take with you." And this sort of emphasis is particularly strong in the Mahayana; it's strongest of all perhaps in Zen. You may remember those Japanese and Chinese pictures of the Sixth Patriarch tearing up The Diamond Sutra, or you may remember the story of the travelling monk who on a cold night chopped up the wooden Buddha images in the temple at which he was staying for fuel because he felt cold, or you may recollect the master saying to the disciple: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him". It's only a means to an end. These are all, rather extreme perhaps rather bizarre ways or means of underlining the same message, that Buddhism is only a means to an end. And it is because Buddhism has always been aware that it was only a means to an end that it has remained down the centuries spiritually so alive. The means has been able to function as a means. If a means becomes an end in itself, it cannot function as a means. For the same reason, Buddhism 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 not persecuted the followers of other forms of Buddhism.

At the beginning of this talk I said that what helped us as individuals to become free was religion, as we may call it. And I further said that if we were to ask the followers of other religions where they stood, where those religions stood in this respect, they will probably say that they too, that the other religions too, helped people, helped the individual, to become free; that they too were a means to an end. But this I may say is not quite fair to Buddhism. Other religions, it must frankly be said, are not really on a par with Buddhism in this respect; they don't always really help the individual to become free. They don't really always see themselves as means to an end in the way that Buddhism does, especially the theistic religions, that is to say the religions that believe in God. Other religions don't have any critique of religion, whether transcendental or otherwise; they don't have any self critique, don't have any critique of themselves and it's therefore necessary that we apply the Buddhist critique to them. It's necessary that we get Vimalakirti to come along. And when we do this, only too often, we find that they - the other religions - are not in fact means to the development of the individual at all. In other words the critique turns into a criticism. Some people think one should not criticise other religions, should not in fact criticise religions and should not criticise Christianity in particular. But criticism is essential; it is only by criticism that one can eliminate what is not in fact a means to one's development as an individual, or what is even an obstacle to one's development as an individual. It's only by means of critique that we can ensure that the means to the development of the individual remains a means and doesn't harden into an end in itself.

So we should apply this critique, even this criticism, to everything that presents itself to us as religion, should apply it to Christianity, should apply it to Buddhism, apply it to the Hinayana, apply it to the Mahayana, apply it to the Vajrayana, should apply it to our own practice of the Dharma. If we practice meditation we should ask ourselves 'is it really helping me to develop?', or if we take part in communication exercises we should ask ourselves 'is it really helping us to develop?', if we study books on Buddhism or attend lectures on Buddhism, 'is it really helping us to develop', similarly if we live in a community or work in a co-op, 'is it really helping us to develop!' We should never allow any of these things to become ends in themselves, should always remember that they are means to an end. If we can do this, then we will ourselves be living embodiments of the reality of religion, and at the same time, living embodiments of the transcendental critique of religion. And if we do this, religion will help us to become free rather than help us to become more enslaved, and we should have perhaps at least a foretaste of the inconceivable liberation.