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Magical *Upāya* in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*

by Edward Hamlin

The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra* (VNS) has long been admired for its felicitous blend of literary and philosophical qualities. Its strong and ambitious narrative—as well as its delight in the magical—can only remind us at times of the *jātakas* and *avadānas*, where the abstractions of Buddhist metaphysics are made approachable for a lay audience through engaging moral fables. In the VNS we find very few of the scholia which distend and break the narrative tension of other large *sūtras*; the action keeps moving, building momentum toward a final and climactic encounter between the Buddha and the householder from Vaiśālī. Our dramatic expectations are skillfully lifted, and, in the end, well satisfied.

Yet the VNS is not a “novel” or an “epic” in any sense we would recognize: just as the moral-phantasmagorical works of a Swift, a Blake, or a Dante elude any single genre, so one cannot do justice to the VNS by analyzing it purely as a tale. Implicit in what follows is my view that the VNS is a Buddhist work *sui generis* which merits and demands its own critical approach. For this text more than for most, the success of a doctrinal argument is hinged on the success of a poetics, and vice versa. The plot line is far more than just an armature for a scholastic discourse; it both vivifies and takes its direction from the issues being debated by Vimalakīrti and his guests. Because it so admirably merges the visionary with the conceptual, the aesthetic with the scholastic, the VNS stands as perhaps the purest example of philosophical drama the surviving Mahāyāna materials provide.

I. Salvific Magic

This essay focuses on an especially sensitive point of contact between Mahāyāna philosophy and Buddhist literary symbolism: the magical manipulation of the phenomenal world by an enlightened being. The *VNS* is simply bursting with magic tricks, usually justified (when justified at all) as instances of bodhisattvic “skill in means,” or *upāya-kauśalya*. According to the doctrine of *upāya*, an enlightened being—a *buddha* or a *bodhisattva*—possesses a special ability and prerogative to use whatever teaching method is best suited to the character and karmic disposition of the student. For a bookish student, an *upāyic* approach might involve a doctrinal sermon or a scholastic debate; for a merchant, a parable involving gold pieces; for a superstitious man, a magic spectacle intended to dazzle and beguile. *Upāya* takes as many forms as the many dispositions of sentient beings, and only the superior insight of the enlightened being would seem to guarantee its appropriateness to the situation at hand.

Even in the Pāli literature, the Buddha can sometimes be found resorting to magic tricks as a teaching device; but only in the Mahāyāna does the practice seem to have a true efflorescence, becoming in certain respects a literary setpiece. It seems plausible that the *VNS* enjoyed an early and important role in this vogue, for magic is central to its texture as a work of imagination. It is certain that the *VNS*'s colorful imagery inspired a host of poetic and visual artworks, from the poetry of Po Chū-i to the sculptures of Lung-men and the large stele now housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

At the same time, the *VNS* is a deeply philosophical text—yet what role can magic possibly play in a sober Madhyamaka dialectic? Certainly, the liberal use of illusion as a plot catalyst raises a host of difficult philosophical questions. But perhaps this is exactly its function. When we witness one of the Buddha's fabulous displays of legerdemain we are prompted to ask: What is the nature of the phenomenal world such that it can be magically manipulated in this way? And what is the moral stance of the being who does so? How can we be sure of his good intentions?

By examining several instances of *upāyic* magic I hope to show how the *VNS*'s two primary rhetorics, the visual and the

discursive,¹ work in tandem to address these questions. In particular, I will examine the tension between the Buddha and Vimalakīrti as rival magicians—for it is here, in the magical contest between a rather otherworldly hierophant and an extremely worldly *bodhisattva*, that the moral and philosophical dimensions of *upāya* come most sharply into focus. We will see, too, that the VNS's careful exploration of *upāya* is really something of a Trojan Horse concealing a much larger question: that of the true status, both moral and ontological, of the Mahāyāna *bodhisattva*.

II. The Upāyic Magician

I have suggested that the VNS is eminently concerned with the notion of “skill in means” (Skt. *upāya-kauśalya*, Tib. *thabs la mkhas pa*). The entire second chapter of the Tibetan text is dedicated to the topic, and the first concludes with a dramatic demonstration of *upāya* in action as the Buddha transforms the universe into a panorama of jewels (Th 18).² The chapters on the humiliation of the *śrāvakas* and *bodhisattvas* are essentially illustrations of Vimalakīrti's upāyic mastery, and as the text moves toward its dramatic *dénouement* we witness ever more arresting examples of his power to conjure.

At the outset, the VNS appears to exhibit a certain structural similarity to the *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka*, which also debates *upāya* in its second chapter while furnishing examples of *upāya* at work. But the similarity between these two important Mahāyāna texts is only superficial: with a closer look we can discern a basic disagreement over the proper *agency* of *upāya*. This disagreement has wide implications, not only for the emergent Mahāyāna doctrine of *upāya*, but also for the early Mahāyāna view of the *bodhisattva*. While both texts ultimately use the *upāya* issue as a means of drawing ontological and ethical distinctions between *buddhas* and *bodhisattvas*, they proceed in very different ways and reach quite different conclusions.

In the *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka* or *Lotus Sūtra*, the Buddha has recourse to the *upāya* doctrine in explaining how a *buddha* can communicate the inscrutable nature of reality to a non-*buddha*.³ A sharp distinction is drawn between the understanding of a

buddha and that of a *bodhisattva*: in a dialogue between *buddhas*, communication of metaphysical truths takes place without artifice, while in the dialogue of a *buddha* and a *bodhisattva* the former must employ *upāya* in demonstrating his insights. The *bodhisattva*'s lesser wisdom places a barrier between him and full metaphysical enlightenment, and all of a *buddha*'s efforts are directed toward its removal. The epistemological gap between a *buddha* and a *śrāvaka*, or a mere *prthagjana*, of course, is even wider, and the *buddha* must adjust his *upāya* accordingly, molding it to the disposition of his listener. This flexibility allows for a wide range of *upāyic* acts, including, as the famous parable of the burning house illustrates, a type of deception.⁴ Far from condoning unethical behavior, however, the *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka* recognizes that the supreme wisdom of a *buddha* allows him to act in ways which, for a non-*buddha*, might be morally dubious.⁵ The *buddha*'s special status as an enlightened being removes his behavior from the formulaic rubric of the *Vinaya* and places it in a realm of *upāyic* compassion. And it is precisely because a *buddha* stands outside of "the burning house of the triple world" that he has a responsibility to employ his *upāya* to spare others. He alone is capable of fully discerning the true nature of reality, including the inward karmic dispositions of beings trapped in the vagaries of rebirth.

So argues the *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka*. By contrast, the *upāya* chapter of the *VNS* opens by extolling Vimalakīrti's long service to the past *buddhas* and his dedication to the *bodhisattva* cause in the present time (Th 20). It is understood, and will later be stated explicitly (Th 43), that he is a *bodhisattva* living as a layman for the sake of saving sentient beings. Yet like a *buddha*, Vimalakīrti is said to have "assimilated an understanding of skill in means" (*thabs mkhas pa rtogs par khong du chud pa*; Osh 155). The remainder of the text will systematically outline Vimalakīrti's *upāya*, even going so far as to establish parallels with the Buddha's own acts of *upāya*.

Evidently, then, the *VNS* does not accept the *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka*'s limitation of *upāya* to the *buddhas*: here even a *bodhisattva* may practice *upāya*, and in doing so he does not appear to raise the moral question addressed by the parable of the burning house. This observation raises a trio of questions which orient us for the present study: (1) What is the ontological

status of magical *upāya* as it is presented in the VNS? (2) What is its moral status, if any? And (3) Are there differences in the magical *upāya* of a *bodhisattva* and that of a *buddha*?

III. The Magical Parasol

As with so many Mahāyāna *sūtras*, the VNS opens with a special spectacle which elevates the plot situation to a supramundane status and sets the philosophical dialogue in gear. A huge assembly of disciples and *bodhisattvas* has gathered in Āmrapālī to hear the Buddha. From the crowd appears a group of Licchavi youths, led by the Bodhisattva Ratnākara and bearing jewelled parasols as offerings for the Buddha. When the last parasol is laid at the Buddha's feet, the offerings are miraculously transformed into a single giant parasol which appears to cover the many universes (Osh 147–8). The particular features of all the worlds seem to be reflected on the underside of the apparitional parasol, complete with the *buddhas* of the ten directions preaching in their respective domains. This cosmic vision astonishes the multitude and prompts Ratnākara to kneel and address a laudatory hymn to the Buddha (Th 13–15).

What is the ontological nature of this incident? The text's choice of language provides a number of interesting clues. As for the transformation itself, we are told that it is "by the power of the Buddha" (*sangs rgyas kyi mthus*; Osh 147)—by his *anubhāva*—that the giant parasol "appears to cover" (*khebs par snang ngo*; Osh 148) the many universes. The use of the Tibetan verb *snang ba* ("to appear"), which Thurman's translation ignores, is significant here, for it points to the linked doctrines of illusion and emptiness which figure importantly in later parts of the text. The magical demonstration reveals the entire galaxy, and most especially, as Ratnākara sings, the fields of the *sugatās* or *buddhas*. It is a sort of beatific vision, a glimpse of the beyond not unlike that which Beatrice grants Dante; yet it is manifestly *derivative*, being only a magically-induced reflection, a second-order appearance.

The distinction between the cosmos itself and its mirror image might seem trivial in light of the tremendous grandeur of what is being shown, but it is important to keep in mind the

special symbolism of such imagery in the Mahāyāna. The theme of visual reflections and illusory doubles is a potent one in Mahāyāna rhetoric; it almost always functions as a didactic allegory for the empty nature of reality.⁶ Though the text makes no explicit ontological statement at this early stage, by introducing the theme of the magical mirror it begins to lay the groundwork for a rhetoric of emptiness to appear in full flower later on.

The incident of the parasols has an equally subtle function within the dramatic structure of the text: it establishes a key axis in the narrative's geography, a *point d'appui* against which the other side of the plot's action—that centered on Vimalakīrti's sickroom—will now steadily begin to pull. Seated amid his retinue in Āmrāpālī, the Buddha uses his power (*anubhāva*) to project the entire universe over his head, thereby rendering himself its spatial and symbolic epicenter. This is none other than the *axis mundi* motif as articulated by Eliade and others;⁷ but in our text it serves to throw the scene at Āmrāpālī into high relief, placing the assembly in a privileged position from which all cosmic events and destinies (*gati*) may be witnessed.

Yet almost immediately the action will leave this high ground and develop a second dramatic axis at Vimalakīrti's house. Just as the VNS allows a *bodhisattva* the power of magical *upāya*, so, in dramatic terms, does it allow his presence and actions to parallel and in some ways compete with those of the Buddha. This peculiar tension between *buddha* and *bodhisattva* hints, perhaps, at the historical ascendancy of the *bodhisattva* as an alternative model of perfection—and perhaps, too, at a slow struggle to accommodate both buddhic and bodhisattvic paradigms into Buddhist dogma without subtracting from the prestige of either. The geographical distance separating *buddha* from *bodhisattva* in the early chapters of the text—a distance which seems more and more treacherous as the disciples tell their stories and thus embellish our picture of Vimalakīrti—may mirror a very real ambivalence about the precise relationship between a *buddha* and a *bodhisattva*, a need to show that these two enlightened beings are in some ways similar but in other ways quite distinct. To test such a supposition we must take our cues from the plotting of the text, for it is here that the symbolic geography so carefully established at the outset is put through

its paces.

IV. Enthronement of the Dharma-king

The spectacle of the giant parasol is followed immediately by Ratnākara's laudatory hymn (Th 13–15). The young Licchavi's verses intensify the emphasis on the Buddha as cosmic focus while preparing the way for a direct comparison with Vimalakīrti.

The Buddha emerges from Ratnākara's hymn as the apotheosis of an Indian *rājarsi*: pure, virtuous, rich in good deeds, he is an ascetic following the path of peace (*dge sbyon zhi ba'i lam brten*; Osh 148). Yet at the same time he is a bull of men, a leader, a Dharma-king, a Lord of Dharma (Th 13). Following the early Buddhist paradigm, he teaches the law of dependent co-origination in order to liberate beings. Doctrine (verses 4, 7, 8) interweaves with sacred or hagiographical history (5, 6) to apotheosize the Buddha and elaborate his special marks (*lakṣaṇa*) (9, 10, 11). Besides elevating the Buddha to a position of supreme respect, Ratnākara's paean serves as a brief Mahāyāna catechism, deftly laying out the philosophical stance of the text and validating it by fusing it with a portrait of the Buddha. The Buddha is a teacher of the doctrine and a sacred king, poised at the center of all destinies (*gati*) and able, through his special powers, to appear individually to each disciple. As we will see, this homology with kingship will ultimately help to distinguish the Buddha from Vimalakīrti even as it raises the critical issue of kingly power and legitimacy.

Having established the sacred identity of the vision's creator, the text goes on to ponder its cosmological significance. Ratnākara, on behalf of his Licchavi cohorts, asks the Buddha to explain the purification of the *buddha*-fields (*buddhakṣetra*) (Th 15), as he has already (in verse 2) identified the vision as revealing "the superb and radiant fields of the Sugatas" (Th 13).

But what exactly is meant by "purification" here? The Buddha's discussion details the ways in which a *bodhisattva*, by the merits of his own practice, draws karmically-ripened beings into his *buddha*-field when he attains enlightenment. A *bodhisattva* perfects his generosity, and thereby causes generous

beings to be reborn in his field; he perfects his morality, and morally virtuous beings are drawn to him. Ultimately, through a causal chain of several links, the purity of the *buddha*-field becomes a reflection of the purity of the *bodhisattva*'s own mind (Th 18). Since the *bodhisattva* has become a *buddha*, this purity cannot be anything less than absolute. Why is it, then, that the "superb and radiant fields of the Sugatas" materialize under the magic parasol replete with all the pure and impure features of the natural cosmos? How is such a kaleidoscopic vision reflective of the Buddha's inner state of purity?

Śāriputra finds himself wondering these very things.⁸ Specifically, he questions whether the apparent impurity of the magically revealed *buddha*-field is somehow a reflex of the impurity of the Buddha's mind when he was still a mere *bodhisattva* (Th 18). And here we encounter the text's first real ontological argument concerning the nature of both upāyically-controlled reality and the cosmos as it appears in everyday life. Let us examine it closely.

The Buddha addresses Śāriputra's doubt by explaining the appearance of the *buddha*-field in terms of the *perceiver's* mental state: "Śāriputra, the *buddha*-field of the Tathāgata is pure, but you do not see it" (Th 18). In explaining the vision this way, the Buddha implies a twofold reality: the first aspect of the real—its genetic or creative aspect—is pure because the *buddha* at the center of the *buddha*-field is pure. But the second aspect—its apparent or phenomenological aspect—conforms to the disposition of the mind which perceives it. As the Buddha puts it: "What do you think, Śāriputra? Is it because the sun and the moon are impure that those blind from birth do not see them?" (Th 18).

Thus, in ontological terms, the *appearance* of the cosmos tells an ordinary man nothing about its intrinsic nature. This radical statement is only emphasized, of course, by the fact that the vision under discussion is a spectacle magically displayed by the Buddha's upāyic powers. But in what sense is this then *upāya*? The Buddha's upāyic emanations seem to be truncated by the narrowness of Śāriputra's mind. As Brahmā Śikhin admonishes him, "Lord Śāriputra, because there are highs and lows in your mind, in reflecting on the Buddha-knowledge you are convinced that it is not wholly pure" (*btsun pa shā ri 'i bu*

sems la mthon dman yod cing sangs rgyas kyi ye shes la bsam pa yongs su ma dag par nges so; Osh 154). Has the Buddha's *upāya* failed for Śāriputra? Or, still more provocatively, is it possible that a spectacle which enlightens one sort of man can simultaneously confuse and mislead another?

V. *The Jewelled Cosmos*

The miracle of the parasols almost immediately undergoes a further mutation which seems to remove any doubt as to the Buddha's complete control over it. With a touch of his toe to the ground the Buddha transforms the cosmos into a matrix of jewels, wherein each beholder perceives himself to be seated on a jewelled throne (Th 18–19). The text intimates that this transfiguration applies not (only?) to the cosmos reflected in the giant parasol, but also to the cosmos in its everyday form. If this is the case, the Buddha has shifted his ontological demonstration from the domain of the overtly magical apparition (the giant parasol-mirror) to that of the "natural" world. This is an ambitious step, for it dramatically equates the common phenomenal world with the illusion built of *māyā*.

Such a step is consistent, of course, with the philosophical stance of the text: when the Buddha later "blunts" (*brtul ba*) his lapidary vision, eighty-four thousand beings who had been "devoted to the grandeur of the *buddha*-field" suddenly see that "all things are by nature but magical creations" (Th 19). As is often the case with Mahāyāna pericopes of magical *upāya*,⁹ it is not so much the vision itself but its withdrawal which precipitates an epiphany in the beholder. Here the visual rhetoric of the text—the mirrored duplicate cosmos, the successive transfigurations of illusion and "real"—drives home a specific doctrinal point, and with such force that each witness to the spectacle has a religious awakening. As we would expect, these awakenings vary with the karmic disposition of the being who is awakened: while the *śrāvakas*, for example, extract a lesson in impermanence from the incident, the *bhikṣus* are released from their *āsravas*. Much later, in the eleventh chapter, the Buddha will further extend this principle of *dispositionality* by asserting that each *buddha*-field emphasizes a particular type of disposition and thus

a particular brand of *upāya* (Th 86).

But what of Śāriputra's concern about the purity of the *buddha*-field? The Buddha answered his disciple by stating that it was Śāriputra's own limited mind which caused various "highs and lows" to infest the original vision of the cosmos. Through his magical *upāya* the Buddha now makes it possible for Śāriputra to see the field as pure (as symbolized by the jewelled array). Yet what has changed—Śāriputra, the cosmos, or the illusion?

The ontological question is confounded further by a religious one: If the Buddha is indeed the creator of his own *buddha*-field, why would he *choose*, as a compassionate being, to fill it with impurities? Or, in thaumaturgic terms, if the Buddha has the power to transform the cosmos by his *upāya*, why does he transform it toward greater impurity?

This is, in essence, a Buddhist wording of the problem of theodicy, or the explanation of the profane's perdurance in default of the sacred's power.¹⁰ As Wendy O'Flaherty has shown, the problem of impure creation found its classical Hindu solution in Vedic and Purāṇic myths, where negative aspects of the universe are created from the more baneful parts of Brahmā's own body.¹¹ For Śāriputra, however, the cosmos is homologized with the sacred being's mind, not his body; Śāriputra's moment of doubt reflects a psychologization of the Vedic "dismembered god" concept, and as such poses a new series of dogmatic dilemmas. A mapping of the variegated, sacred/profane cosmos against the Buddha's presumably pure mind could hardly be supported in Śāriputra's naïve, devotional view.

The specific vocabulary of the "jewelled cosmos" passage reveals a curious stance toward these ontological and religious questions. Rather than speaking of the Buddha "creating" the series of apparitions, the text prefers to say that he simply "shows" them (*ston*). Is the Buddha the actual creator of his *buddha*-field, or merely its presiding genius? There is evidence in the text to support both positions; side-by-side with the consistent use of *ston* to imply a mere manipulation of what already exists, we find a curious passage in which the Buddha speaks of a *bodhisattva* "making" (*bya ba*; Osh 151) a *buddha*-field to ripen beings. But the use of *ston* in adverbial phrases ("show as X") is common and consistent enough to suggest that the text is generally more comfortable in describing the *mode* of an ap-

pearance than in assessing its ontological value. Rhetorically, the *VNS* uses *ston* in a relatively conventional fashion; ontologically, its use seems to indicate a certain indecision regarding the status of upāyic magic. Does the text mean to say that the vision of the jewelled cosmos is a revelation of the “true” nature of the *buddha*-field—and thus of the Buddha’s mental state?

The Buddha puts it this way: “Śāriputra, the *buddha*-field is always like this; but for the sake of ripening lower beings, the Tathāgata shows it as contaminated by many faults” (Osh 154). The notion of “like this” is conveyed in Tibetan by *'di 'dra*, probably reflecting a Sanskrit *tad iva* or a similar construction—a phrase whose imprecision in the source languages is much like its imprecision in English. We have no clue as to whether the relation of the jewelled vision to the *buddha*-field is one of simile, mimesis, metaphor, or identity. In short, even in this pivotal passage the ontological status of the upāyic vision is left open to question.

We also detect here a subtle shift in the Buddha’s rhetoric: whereas at first he insisted to Śāriputra that the impurities in the cosmic vision were the result of Śāriputra’s own deficiency, now he suggests that these impurities are his own upāyic creation. Yet these two positions are not necessarily contradictory. It is, after all, the *translation* of ordinary reality through the first vision and then the second which enlightens Śāriputra—the three stages taken together form a soteriological unity, and thus fall credibly under the rubric of *upāya*. While the text sidesteps any firm ontological analysis of the various levels of visions, then, it clearly exposes the two key aspects of the upāyic process: first, the importance of the beholder’s karmic disposition; and second, the *process* of progressive insight as steered by an enlightened being. The incessant use of visual language (*ston*, *snaṅg*) roots the Buddha’s upāyic magic firmly in the phenomenological realm; though upāyic conjurings may provide their beholders with a realization of ontological emptiness, their own ontological status remains indefinite. As the case of Śāriputra demonstrates, it is the magical-upāyic *process*, as represented in the three stages of the jewelled cosmos vision, which matters most—for it is only by considering a *juxtaposition* of visions that the disciple is able to see ontological questions in a new light. No single vision provides the necessary point and

counterpoint for this characteristically Mahāyānist awakening.

By the same token, the problem of the Buddha's own mental purity—or his legitimacy as a Dharma-king, to voice the obvious implications—is deftly skirted by an invocation of skill in means. By transforming the variegated cosmos into a jewelled expanse, the Buddha shows not the true nature of his own mind, but the emptiness of the impurities Śāriputra observes in the world. These impurities have their origin in *upāya*, as the metamorphosis of *upāya* proves.

With this established, the theodical problem is also removed: the Buddha causes the *buddha*-field to manifest impurities solely in order to lead lower beings to liberation. With the greatest possible economy, then, the *VNS* is able to transmute a challenge to the Buddha's legitimacy and good intentions into a vivid proof of his compassion. By the close of the first chapter the text has apotheosized the Buddha as a supreme manipulator of phenomenological realities, a compassionate magician whose intentions are always salvational and consonant with the Dharma. But what of Vimalakīrti, that magician of equally impressive powers?

VI. *Illness as Metaphor*

With the introduction of the Bodhisattva Vimalakīrti in the *VNS*'s second chapter, a second dramatic epicenter begins to emerge, one which presents a rhetorical counterpoint to the Buddha's actions and words. Having elevated the Dharma-king to a stature of religious supremacy and established his seat at Āmrāpālī as the center of the cosmic array, the text shifts quickly to Vimalakīrti's house within the city of Vaiśālī, outlining the Bodhisattva's character through an elegiac recitation of his qualities and attainments. From the start he is described through contrasts, oppositions which have the effect of casting his life as a continuous play between illusion and reality: he wears layman's clothes, yet lives as a *śramaṇa*; he has a wife, a son and harem, yet practices purity; he appears to be surrounded by a retinue, yet practices solitude; he appears to eat, yet is nourished by the virtues of his meditation (Osh 155–6). Once again, then, we have a rhetoric of appearance: the spiritual being appears

to do one thing while actually doing its opposite. Nor is there any doubt as to the reason for this duplicity. We are told explicitly that Vimalakīrti lives in Vaiśālī for the sake of ripening sentient beings through his *upāya* (Osh 155). If he goes to games and gambling houses, it is for the sake of converting gamers and gamblers; if he goes into brothels it is for the sake of illuminating the evils of desire (Th 21). His actions are not capricious but are, on the contrary, carefully crafted as salvific strategies.

We have here an *upāya* which, while grounded in the manipulation of illusion, also invests itself in worldly life. The Buddha employs his *upāya* in essentially two modes, the spectacular and the verbal-homilitic; this is appropriate to his dual role as a cosmic or semi-docetic saint, on the one hand, and a teacher of men on the other. By contrast, Vimalakīrti, as a *bodhisattva*, employs his *upāya* initially through his worldly actions, preferring to teach by example. This aspect of his spiritual praxis is the main theme of our introduction to him as a protagonist, and by its position in the text stands in sharp contrast to the apotheosized Buddha at Āmrāpālī.

Immediately, however, the relationship between the Buddha and Vimalakīrti is complicated. We learn that Vimalakīrti, through his "skill in liberative technique," "shows" (*bstan = ston*) himself "as if" (*lta bur*) ill (Osh 157). This illusion—the first hint of what will soon emerge as a formidable power of illusion—has the effect of drawing visitors to his house to inquire after his health. Their visits give the malingering Bodhisattva a perfect pretext for a discourse on the emptiness and impermanence of the human body (Th 22–3). To undermine the human trust in the body's reality (*satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*) Vimalakīrti characterizes it as prone to disease, ownerless, inert, selfless, lifeless, unreal, void, insensate, filthy and false; in a series of similes he likens it to a mirage, a machine, an illusion, a dream, a reflection, an echo, a cloud, and an old well. This didactic interlude, besides opening the text to a common universe of Mahāyāna imagery concerning emptiness,¹² deepens its preoccupation with illusion.

In clear contrast with the action of the first chapter, in which the Buddha displays both verbal and magical *upāya* in grand style, Vimalakīrti's first exercises of *upāya* are quite modest and only subtly magical. They serve in all cases merely to set up or introduce a doctrinal discourse, and no claim is made for their

own power to enlighten. Whereas the beholders of the parasol and jewel miracles are brought to epiphany by the mere sight of the visual spectacles, those who experience Vimalakīrti's illusory sickness conceive the spirit of enlightenment only from the verbal discourse which the "sick" man delivers. The illness is an elegant metaphor for impermanence and spiritual sickness, but its religious meaning comes out only under the invalid's interpretive lecture. Moreover, though it is upāyically conjured, there is nothing outwardly magical about the Bodhisattva's indisposition; far from being a bold celestial spectacle of the Buddha's type, it is only a homely affliction. The contrast of upāyic modes, though it will seem to vanish as the text moves forward, underscores an important tension between the buddhic and bodhisattvic paradigms of the VNS. As we will see, this tension drives the story forward, not only dramatically, but philosophically as well.

VII. *The Gadfly of Vaiśālī*

The two long chapters following that in which Vimalakīrti is introduced are dedicated to an exploration of his verbal, and chiefly non-magical, *upāya*. As the disciples and then the *bodhisattvas* in the Buddha's retinue relate their tales of humiliation at Vimalakīrti's hand we begin to get a clear picture of the gentleman from Vaiśālī as something of a curmudgeon, a relentless debunker who makes it his business to confront pious Buddhists and challenge their conduct. In this respect Vimalakīrti must sometimes remind us of Socrates, who loiters at the fringes of Athenian society to unmask hypocrites and attack the cant of the Sophists. One by one the Buddha's followers beg to be released from their assignment to call on the invalid, and as their stories unfold and interweave, the figure of Vimalakīrti grows to larger and larger dimensions, challenging that of the Buddha himself. Moreover, the very length of the "reluctance" chapters (twenty-nine folios in the Peking edition) builds an element of suspense into the *sūtra*, pointing ever more strongly to the absent Vimalakīrti in his sickroom within in the city. By withholding him from us the text intensifies his mystique and effectively builds anticipation toward a confrontation with

him at a later point.

This dramatic technique reinforces the general tension between *buddha* and *bodhisattva* which we have been highlighting. The fact that the disciples refuse a request of the Buddha—who is, after all, their Dharma-king—cannot but create a direct rivalry between him and the Vimalakīrti they dread. *The implication of these anecdotes is that even a mere bodhisattva's power can be such that a buddha's wishes must be left unanswered*—a profound implication indeed, especially as the reluctant disciples must refuse the Buddha directly to his face.

As the disciples temporize, of course, they repeat fragments of Vimalakīrti's challenges and sermons, thereby illustrating the variety of his upāyic devices. Yet for the most part, the incidents have nothing particularly magical about them; the Bodhisattva's *upāya* is of the dialectical or homilistic variety, confined to well-chosen words and retorts.¹³ The main point of the section is to crystallize Vimalakīrti's way of life, his attitude as he moves through the lay world, and to build him into a compelling character with a formidable personal mythos.

We must assume further, though, that the passages are meant to describe Vimalakīrti in soteriological or hagiographical terms. If he is not an overt hypocrite—if he practices what he preaches—his admonitions provide us with a clue to his own level of attainment and place within the Buddhist spiritual hierarchy. Can we assume otherwise when he advises Śāriputra to “absorb yourself in contemplation in such a way that you manifest all ordinary behavior without forsaking cessation” or to “manifest the nature of an ordinary person without abandoning your cultivated spiritual nature” (Th 24)? These admonitions dovetail perfectly with the initial descriptions of Vimalakīrti in the second chapter. In remonstrating with Mahāmaudgalyāyana, in fact, the roving Bodhisattva gives us a succinct picture of his own present activities: “You should be adept in regard to the spiritual faculties of living beings . . . you should teach the Dharma in order that the continuity of the Three Jewels may never be interrupted” (Th 26). He flourishes his ability to intuit “the spiritual faculties of all beings” in the presence of Pūrṇa, causing some young monks to recall their prior lives and recognize their bodhic natures (Th 28–9); Pūrṇa concludes that Vimalakīrti surely must be something more than a

śrāvaka, for the psychic feat he has just witnessed is one which traditionally belongs only to a *tathāgata*. This comparison with the Tathāgata is echoed boldly by Upāli, who warns his companions: “Do not entertain the notion that he is a mere householder! Why? *With the exception of the Tathāgata himself*, there is no disciple or bodhisattva capable of competing with his eloquence or rivaling the brilliance of his wisdom” (Th 31, italics mine). And indeed, the series of tales we hear about Vimalakīrti’s litigious encounters with the disciples would seem to confirm Upāli’s assessment.

I noted above that the upāyic mode for the *śrāvaka* chapter is almost exclusively verbal. But as we move through the *bodhisattva* chapter we begin to notice the intrusion of small magical motives, minor upāyic spectacles which prepare the ground for the coming confrontation of Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī. The final two pericopes of Vimalakīrti’s humiliation of the *bodhisattvas*—those involving Jagatīmdhara and Sudatta—offer pointed parallels to two of the Buddha’s powerful feats, leaving no doubt that the man from Vaisālī is in some sense a rival of the Blessed One. In the Jagatīmdhara incident, Vimalakīrti is able to unveil a magic trick of Māra’s, exposing the Buddha’s old foe and leaving him hoist with his own petard. Not only does the Bodhisattva unmask “Indra” as the evil tempter, but he takes the opportunity to convert the twelve thousand maidens with whom Māra had meant to compromise Jagatīmdhara (Th 37–8). This is certainly a symbolic homology of the Buddha’s famous defeat of Māra during the night under the tree of enlightenment; it implies that Vimalakīrti shares with the Buddha an ability to identify the personification of the *adharma* and uproot it.

To complete the homology and thread it once more into the present-time storyline, Vimalakīrti is described by Sudatta as having performed a magic trick very much like the Buddha’s conversion of the parasols in the first chapter. The miracle reveals a universe called Marīci and shows a pearl necklace transformed into a pearl-inlaid pavilion (Th 41). Though the specifics are different from those of the parasol miracle, the formal structure of the spectacle is much the same: like the parasols, the pearl necklace is a devotional gift; like the cosmic canopy, another universe is displayed magically; and as with

the merger of the many parasols into a single giant one, the ornament of pearls is transformed into a single large pavilion. The dramatic implication of the incident is that Vimalakīrti's cosmic-magical powers, when employed, are comparable to those of the Buddha. Though a mere *bodhisattva*, he can, like the Buddha, freely manipulate reality to serve his upāyic ends.

VIII. Emptiness and Upāya

With Mañjuśrī's call on the invalid Vimalakīrti, the two foci of the narrative finally begin to converge. Mañjuśrī, the only *bodhisattva* bold enough to take on Vimalakīrti, does not hesitate to engage him in a lively philosophical conversation. The topic is emptiness; the entry point, Vimalakīrti's illusory illness. Once again the Bodhisattva exploits his metaphor to the fullest, arguing that his illness is merely a reflection of the more basic illness—the spiritual cupidity—of sentient beings. Here at last he explicitly calls himself a *bodhisattva*, and admits that his affliction is a device of *māyā*. These clarifications, following rapidly upon one another (Th 42–3), point inevitably to the central doctrine of *śūnyatā*. But they also provide an opportunity for Vimalakīrti to link emptiness with the *bodhisattva* path, the path of compassionate *upāya*. Specifically, emptiness acts as a corrective to “sentimental compassion” or a “compassion of attachment” (*phan yon du lta bar . . . snying rje*; Osh 183; Th 46). In this sense, emptiness guides the *bodhisattva*, allowing him to be compassionate and energetic in his dealings with others without clinging to these relations.

In this discourse we see a new relationship between *upāya* and *śūnyatā*. In previous instances of upāyic magic, the alternation of “natural” phenomenal appearances and plainly spectacular appearances functioned to reveal ordinary phenomenal reality as essentially empty, analogous to the conjured images or a reflection in a mirror. Now, however, Vimalakīrti argues that the understanding of emptiness can guide *upāya* itself, maintaining its appropriateness in a philosophical sense. Because the *bodhisattva* regards all beings as empty, there is no danger that he will become attached to them in the course of discharging his upāyic duties. True compassion purifies the *bodhisattva* to

the point where his voluntary incarnation resembles the final liberation, or *nirvāṇa* (Th 46); cloying compassion, on the other hand, sends him through a cycle of reincarnations fired by the *karma* which his spurious attachments accumulate. *Upāya*, then, not only manipulates and displays emptiness, as it were, but takes its cues from emptiness and is circumscribed by it. Emptiness acts as a moral force for the *bodhisattva* as he moves through the world on his mission of liberation, protecting him from backsliding and helping to keep his vision pure.

IX. The Magical Thrones

With this key point established, Vimalakīrti is freed to exercise his magic to its fullest extent. The Bodhisattva's *upāya* is now grounded both morally and metaphysically; it remains only to distinguish it from that of a *buddha*. As the head-on encounter between Vimalakīrti and the Buddha draws closer, the *VNS* will explore Vimalakīrti's bodhisattvic magic with closer attention, integrating it with the bodhisattvic paradigm laid out in the "reluctance" chapters. The most important locus for this examination is a miracle performed in the middle chapters: the transportation of the lion thrones into the Bodhisattva's sickroom.

Śāriputra, the hapless Pierrot of the *sūtra* literature, finds himself the butt of several gentle drolleries once he enters Vimalakīrti's house. One of these serves as the trigger of the throne spectacle: looking about him, the practical-minded Śāriputra wonders where the crowd of visitors will all find seats. Vimalakīrti reads his mind and teases him, "Reverend Śāriputra, did you come here for the sake of the Dharma? Or did you come here for the sake of a chair?" (Th 50). The two men engage in a brief exchange which interprets the question of chairs as one of attachment to the physical body. In the end, however, Vimalakīrti honors Śāriputra's wish by telekinetically transporting 32,000 thrones from another universe into his room. The miracle exhibits a number of "impossible" features: the thrones, which are of large dimensions, arrange themselves in the house without any crowding; the house enlarges itself to accommodate them; the city is not obscured by the spectacle

(Th 51–2). The more advanced *bodhisattvas* transform their physical bodies so as to mount the lofty thrones; Vimalakīrti gives the lesser *bodhisattvas* a special teaching which enables them to follow suit. Finally, with a respectful bow to the Tathāgata of the other universe, the *śrāvakas* too are able to seat themselves. All this is accomplished through Vimalakīrti's legerdemain, and the surrounding world is left just as it was before.

Śāriputra revels in this achievement, prompting the Bodhisattva to dilate upon the nature of his powers over phenomenal reality. One who has attained the "inconceivable liberation" (*acintyavimokṣa*) has the ability to alter the appearance of space and time at will; he can put Mount Sumeru, the largest of mountains, into a mustard seed, or make the passing of a week seem like the passing of an aeon (Th 52–3).

Critically, however, the efficacy of these miracles depends upon the karmic receptivity of those who are meant to experience them. Thus, even the most ambitious upāyic magic is subject to the disposition of its beholder. While the text suggests earlier that this upāyic dispositionality is the responsibility of the magician himself, the present passage implies that dispositionality is rooted in the karmic matrix of the world around—specifically, in the subtle interplay between the magician's power to manipulate *māyā* and the karmic context of the beholder.

Such a necessity begins, in fact, with the very notion of the miraculous: miracles appear as miracles only to those who are "destined to be disciplined by miracles" (Th 52). Not only is the particular setting and form of the apparition a function of the beholder's karmic disposition; its very existence, its phenomenological possibility, depends on the presence of a receptive mind. The present passage suggests, then, that upāyic dispositionality is more than merely a positive quality added to a miracle by its creator: it is a root condition without which the miracle cannot come to be. The dogmatic implication of this principle is that the miracle of an enlightened being cannot spring from anything other than *upāya*. Gratuitous magic—the cosmic sport or *līlā* of the classic Indian gods—is not the magic of a *buddha*, nor that of a *bodhisattva*. Magic has a purpose, and this purpose is rigidly governed by the force of the karmic situation in which it is unfurled.¹⁴

X. *The Goddess*

The deservedly famous chapter on the dialogue between Śāriputra and the Goddess contains, besides their noteworthy *pas de deux*, a number of interludes which press forward key philosophical issues. Foremost among these issues is the Mahāyāna paradox of empty compassion: If a *bodhisattva* regards all living beings as essentially empty, how and why should he exercise compassion toward them? Vimalakīrti's answer is terse and to the point: a *bodhisattva* should recall his own realization, knowing his own emptiness, and help others to attain realization while knowing theirs. In short, the *bodhisattva*'s empathy for the phenomenological world of illusory beings allows him—compels him—to transcend a lazy nihilism and come to their aid. Empty or not, suffering is an *experienced* reality which can be mitigated with proper insight and application.

This reply, by returning to the phenomenological paradigm and accepting its lived value if not its veridical value, dovetails perfectly with the metaphysical position the text has adopted toward *upāyic* miracles: by emphasizing the *cognitive* immediacy of both suffering and magic, the VNS is able to propound a rigorous philosophy of emptiness without falling into pessimism or passive nihilism. Here, too, we find the basis for the text's moral view of *upāya*: the *bodhisattva*'s magical means are not arbitrary, though they may be founded on emptiness; on the contrary, the karmic matrix which underpins the phenomenological world guarantees that they will never turn pernicious. Because the dispositionality of *upāya* is in some sense beyond the magician's control, arising as it does from the *karma* of the beholder, magic is always *experienced* in such a way as to serve the soteriological interests of the experiencer.

We might say, then, that *upāya* finds its justification on the ontic plane.¹⁵ Importantly, however, it succeeds soteriologically by shifting its beneficiary from an ontic and conventional view of reality into an ontological mode: that is, it makes him aware of the *essence* of his ontic experience, which is only emptiness. This play between ontic and ontological, besides allowing us to grasp the rhetorical structure of the text, provides the basic paradigm of the Mahāyāna Buddhist epiphany. After each instance of magical *māyā*, some or all of the witnesses have a

moment of awakening in which they *see*, in a pregnant sense, the underlying structure of reality. Magic creates a disruption, a wrinkle, in the usually unbroken continuity of ontic awareness, and it is through this disruption that the nature of the phenomenal world is disclosed as emptiness.

The episode of the Goddess and Śāriputra attacks one of the most basic types of *ontic immersion or blindness*: the *satkāyadr̥ṣṭi*, or view of the physical body's reality. As in the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, a dramatic sex change reveals the arbitrariness of the body's manifestation; and also as in the Lotus, it is Śāriputra who triggers the spectacle.¹⁶ By the Goddess's magical power (*byin gyi brlab pa*; Osh 199) he is made to appear (*snang*) as the Goddess herself (*lha mo de ci 'dra ba*; Osh 199). The Goddess's prankish conjuring is intended as a reply to Śāriputra's inquiry as to why she does not transform herself (*bsgyur*) out of her female state; when the miracle has taken effect she taunts him, "Reverend Śāriputra, what prevents you from transforming yourself from your female state?" (Th 62).

The ensuing exchange brings the rhetoric of illusion back to center stage, arguing that one's physical appearance is mere *māyā* (Th 62). Philosophically, Śāriputra and the Goddess conclude that something unmade cannot be changed—and that all things, like Śāriputra's female form, are neither made nor changed. This conclusion is foreshadowed in the very opening steps of their dialogue, as the Goddess explicitly introduces the theme of magical *māyā*: "Reverend Śāriputra, if a magician were to incarnate a woman by magic, would you ask her, 'What prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?'" (Th 61). The word for "magician" here is *sgyu ma mkhan*—literally, "*māyā*-adept." That Śāriputra is himself subject to the vagaries of illusion, even in his physical being, is a break in his ontic continuum which he can hardly ignore. The philosophical thread of the scene is emptiness; rhetorically, it serves to create a transition from the still dominantly verbal *upāya* of the middle chapters to the ambitious visual *upāya* to come. Whereas the miracle of the transported thrones focused attention on the role of the individual's *karma* in governing magic *upāya*, Śāriputra's transformation radically undercuts any tendency to identify this individual *karma* with the physical body. Scene by scene, a clear theory of *upāya* emerges, preparing the way for the magical

finale of the closing chapters.

XI. Two Emptinesses

Chapters Eight and Nine, coming in the wake of Śāriputra's interlude with the Goddess, further pursue the lesson of emptiness she has given him. In contrast to the disciple Śāriputra's somewhat plodding questions, Chapter Eight gives us a model *bodhisattva* whose behavior is a perfect expression of his metaphysical understanding:

Of the true bodhisattvas,
 The mother is the transcendence of wisdom,
 The father is the skill in liberative technique;
 The Leaders are born of such parents. (Th 67)

While dilating upon the *bodhisattva's* profound understanding of the nature of reality, the verses which comprise the body of the chapter also stress his worldliness, his self-chosen embeddedness in the samsāric order. The *bodhisattva* metamorphoses himself into a hell-being, an animal, a courtesan, a head of state, a holy man—whatever guise will serve him in developing living beings. His *upāya* expresses itself in a willingness to assume all shapes, to melt into a series of magical masks, to utterly abandon his personal identity. In this sense it becomes, of course, an object lesson in *nairātmya*, or the unfoundedness of belief in self. The *bodhisattva* is emptiness in action. Though always present in times of need, though always energetic in easing the suffering of those around him, the true *bodhisattva* is intangible, empty—and this ineffable quality is, perhaps, his deepest metaphysical teaching:

They manifest birth voluntarily,
 Yet they are not born, nor do they originate.
 They shine in all the fields of the Buddhas,
 Just like the rising sun. (Th 68)

Chapter Eight, then, establishes both the *bodhisattva* career and its metaphysical emptiness. In Chapter Nine, the rhetoric of emptiness receives a more abstract dialectical treatment,

pointedly shifting from an ontic account of the *bodhisattva*'s path to an ontological debate over how he "enters the Dharma-door of non-duality" (Th 73). While Chapter Eight clearly demonstrates the emptiness of the person, Chapter Nine concerns itself with the emptiness of concepts. These two wings of the doctrine of emptiness—which shadow the text's dichotomy of visual and verbal *upāya*—lay the groundwork for the meeting of the Buddha and Vimalakīrti. Vimalakīrti's famous silence, far from terminating all possibilities for verbal discourse in favor of purely active *upāya*, actually unites these two emptinesses: part of verbal *upāya*, after all, is knowing when silence, or a *buddha*'s inscrutable smile, can be eloquent. The skillful alternation of discourse and action is precisely what defines Vimalakīrti's *bodhisattva* practice.

XII. A Meeting of Magics

The final three chapters of the VNS witness a long-awaited meeting between the Bodhisattva Vimalakīrti—empty though he may be—and the Buddha. Here at last we find a dramatic resolution of the tension which has been rigorously maintained between the text's two chief spiritual figures: as the invalid transports himself and his visitors (by magic, of course) to the Buddha's seat at Āmrapālī, we begin to see the intent of the carefully established homology between the two characters. Two paradigms of sainthood are at play here, and the figure of Vimalakīrti, by a subtle refraction, illuminates for us an important indecision or historical motion in the Mahāyāna concept of buddhahood. The interplay of the two saints, while plainly meant to valorize the *bodhisattva* as a character model, also reveals something significant about the Buddha's changing status.

Chapters Ten and Eleven, those leading up to the final encounter, serve to revive the theme of *upāya*, fitting it into the cosmological scheme with a chain of references to the multitude of world systems and their respective ways of life. Vimalakīrti's magical power is so vast that he "sends magical incarnations to all the *buddha*-fields of the ten directions, and all these incarnations accomplish the *buddha*-work for all the living beings in all those *buddha*-fields" (Th 80); but by incarnating voluntarily in the lowly Sahā world, full of the "wild and uncivilized," the

bodhisattva has the precious opportunity to practice the ten virtues which befit only such a bleak rung of existence (Th 82–3). In the *Sahā* world the Buddha finds unadorned verbal teaching to be the most suitable mode of *upāya*, for the most part simply identifying what should be done and what shouldn't (Th 82).¹⁷

The Bodhisattva, too, finds great salvational power in the practice of simple ethical virtues of a non-magical character. In this passage, a more conventional view of *upāya* balances the magical *upāya* which permeates the rest of the text; it serves to remind us, perhaps, that the varieties of *upāya* are as many as the *buddha*-fields in which *bodhisattvas* act *upāyically*. Once again we have a steady insistence on what I have called the *dispositionality* of skill in means: the karmic context of its exercise determines the specific character of *upāya*, guaranteeing its liberative efficacy.

Despite the Buddha's stated reliance on verbal teaching, however, the present text abounds in miracles. Why? As we have seen, the various miraculous happenings which move the narrative forward serve primarily to catalyze or provoke a verbal response: a question, a dharma-lecture, a dialogue. It is not that, as the saying has it, "miracles quickly convert the common man" (*āsu pṛthagjanasya rddhirāvarjanakārī*)¹⁸; rather, it is a case of miracles provoking the beholder into metaphysical curiosity. The interplay of visual and verbal rhetorics is most pronounced when Vimalakīrti at last betakes himself and his company to the Buddha—and it is here, too, that the subtle differences between Vimalakīrti's magical *upāya* and that of the Buddha become most apparent.

Chapter Eleven begins with a small but portentous miracle: the Buddha's surroundings at Āmrāpālī begin, of their own accord, to expand, while the assembled disciples begin to take on a golden hue (Th 84). The Buddha interprets these signs as an indication that Vimalakīrti is coming to visit, but the text leaves the source of the miracle unnamed. Is the omen the result of Vimalakīrti's magic, the Buddha's, or neither? We are not informed. But Vimalakīrti soon confirms the Buddha's surmise by magically transporting himself and his company to the garden. Upon his arrival the Bodhisattva makes the customary gestures of reverence to the Tathāgata, prostrating himself before the Dharma-king and assuming an uncharacteristic and

deferent silence. The vastness of his own upāyic powers does not prevent him from rendering proper homage to *il miglior fabbro*.

This setpiece is followed by a brief dialogue between Ānanda, the Buddha and Vimalakīrti concerning the ambrosial *amṛta* which the *bodhisattvas* have taken for lunch and which now seeps from their pores to perfume the air. Doctrinally, the core of the discussion is the significance of this *amṛta* as a metaphor for the upāyic teaching of Dharma: like a dispositional teaching, the nectar stays in the drinker's body until he has attained the realization appropriate to his spiritual stage (Th 85). For beings who have not yet formulated the thought of enlightenment, the *amṛta* will be digested only when they do so; for those who have already conceived the *bodhicitta*, the nectar will persist until they realize *kṣānti*—and so on.

It remains for the Buddha to expand Vimalakīrti's explanation to describe the general principle of dispositionality throughout all the *buddha*-fields, as well as the unity of all *buddhas* despite their outward difference (Th 86–7). This discourse prompts the visiting *bodhisattvas* from the ambrosial *buddha*-field to ask the Buddha for a final teaching to take home with them. In what follows, the Buddha brings together the ontic and the ontological streams of the text, arguing that, ontically, the *bodhisattva* must plunge into the world of compounded things (*'dus byas*; Osh 224), while ontologically he must not rest in the uncompounded (*'dus ma byas la mi gnas*; Osh 225). This double mandate throws into high relief the career of the *bodhisattva* as an engaged being, one who comprehends the ultimate nature of things yet ceaselessly applies himself to salvational work in the world. The entire text, in fact, when considered from the rhetorical perspective, has exemplified this position, skirting a full-blown ontology in favor of a persistent concern with praxis. Though the *VNS* is certainly not without its philosophical interludes, in comparison with other Mahāyāna works of its time it is rather uniquely concerned with playing out the actual practices of the *bodhisattva*'s life, deferring many scholastic problems which might blur its pragmatic vision. Needless to say, this vision is largely one of *upāya*.

It is in the final chapter of the *VNS* that the career of the *bodhisattva*—and his soteriological value—are given their ulti-

mate vindication. The Bodhisattva Vimalakīrti stands before the Blessed One, surrounded by a multitude of admiring disciples. As if in challenge, the Buddha asks: “Noble son, when you would see the Tathāgata, how do you view him?” (Th 91). Vimalakīrti’s answer is highly significant—it is, in fact, the key to his own dramatic and philosophical function within the text.

According to the Saint from Vaiśālī, the Tathāgata is nothing but an interplay of opposites, an inexpressible being whose nature eludes human concepts: he does not dwell in the present, nor arise from the past, nor pass into the future; he is identified with the reality of form, yet is not form; he abides in ultimate reality (*de bzhin nyid*; Osh 227), yet between it and him there is no connection (Th 91). Not devoid of characteristics, he is not possessed of them either; he is neither name nor sign; he is neither good nor evil. On the whole, he is simply inexplicable (*don du ’ang brjod pa ma lags pa*; Osh 228). No verbal teaching can express him (Th 92).

The Buddha as painted here is ineffable; even a *bodhisattva* as advanced a Vimalakīrti can barely grapple with his state of being. As we will see presently, this view of the Buddha—not so far removed, perhaps, from the docetic view of Christ—creates the need for a more manageable character model, a personification of enlightenment whose (apparent) reality is manifest and approachable. The final miracle of the *VNS* acts to establish the Bodhisattva as the man for the job: juxtaposed between the buddhic order and the *saṃsāric*, the *bodhisattva* acts as a religious interpreter, a sort of missing link who makes enlightenment comprehensible to those in the lower worlds.

Moreover, this pivotal role for Vimalakīrti explains much about the construction of the text itself: in particular, it helps to account for the subtle and tireless parallelism which is maintained between Vimalakīrti and the Buddha, on the one hand, and Vimalakīrti and the common householder on the other.

The Buddha himself plainly realizes this important function of the Bodhisattva, for he overtly countermands Vimalakīrti in order to emphasize bodhisattvic embeddedness in the *saṃsāric* order. Śāriputra asks Vimalakīrti where he might have died in order to reincarnate in the lowly *Sahā* world. In reply, and perhaps with a bit of dry wit at Śāriputra’s effrontery, Vimalakīrti promptly deconstructs the question, arguing that since all things

are essentially magical creations, he cannot have been reincarnated (Th 92–3). Surprisingly, though, the Buddha raises his voice to sidestep Vimalakīrti's non-answer and give Śāriputra a direct, non-ontological reply: Vimalakīrti, he says, is from the Abhirati universe, which is under the spiritual guidance of Akṣobhya.

Despite Vimalakīrti's dissembling, then, the Blessed One locates him squarely within the cosmological spectrum, answering Śāriputra's question on Śāriputra's own level. This leads Vimalakīrti to relent and offer a more ontically comprehensible explanation of his own rebirth, admitting that he has in fact reincarnated in the Sahā universe, whether he and the universe are mere *māyā* or not (Th 93).

The assembly then wishes to see the Abhirati universe. The Buddha, reading the thoughts of the disciples, orders Vimalakīrti to reveal it: or, in more interpretive terms, the Dharmaking commands his proxy to perform some magic for the good of the multitude. Vimalakīrti executes the miracle as ordered, and the company is rightly astounded. This accomplished, a highly significant exchange occurs between Śāriputra and the Buddha, the final dialogue of the text proper: the Buddha asks Śāriputra if he has seen the conjured universe, whereupon Śāriputra extolls Vimalakīrti in terms which make the Bodhisattva's religious function clear at last:

I saw it, Lord! May all living beings come to live in a buddha-field as splendid as that! May all living beings come to have miraculous powers just like those of the noble Licchavi Vimalakīrti!

We have gained great benefit from having seen a holy man such as he. We have gained a great benefit from having heard such teaching of the Dharma, whether the Tathāgata himself still actually exists or whether he has already attained ultimate liberation. (Th 95)

Śāriputra's speech reveals a certain metaphysical doubt with regard to the Buddha: though standing before him, and indeed being addressed by him, the ordinary disciple is simply uncertain whether what he sees as the Buddha is real or merely a trick of magic. Vimalakīrti, however, despite his own Madhyamaka rhetoric to the contrary, is real enough—or seems so—to have

a profoundly liberative effect upon his beholder.

Here, I believe, we have the essential division between the Buddha and Vimalakīrti as religious teachers. The Buddha as portrayed in the *VNS* is a cosmic figure, well on his way to docetic apotheosis; Vimalakīrti, as his proxy in the marketplace and in the household, is a man of the world, empowered with magic but indefatigably engaged in the external affairs of common men. We might even wonder, in fact, whether Vimalakīrti himself is a creation of the Buddha's, an upāyic vision magically conjured in order to infiltrate the everyday world. But this radical possibility aside, the Buddha's use of Vimalakīrti—his respectful praise for him, his insistence on his worldly embeddedness, his deferral to Vimalakīrti's magic in the final scene—is plainly upāyic in the wider sense. The Buddha seems to realize that Vimalakīrti is a more approachable figure for the average disciple, a character model one can actually hope to emulate. In this sense, Vimalakīrti secures the worldly foundation of religious life while the Buddha himself is raised to a more and more docetic or metaphysical status.

Conclusion

The *VNS* presents us with two of the most compelling characters in the early Mahāyāna literature, each drawn with remarkable finesse and considerable philosophical rigor. By playing them against one another through mechanisms of plot and rhetoric, it maintains a sharp tension between them, highlighting certain parallelisms which unite them while acknowledging their profound differences. The Buddha is no longer the humble teacher of the Pāli texts; he is rapidly becoming a supramundane, divinized figure, whose earthly presence is built on the shaky edifice of *māyā*. Against this apothetic upward pressure the *VNS* installs the Bodhisattva as anchor, establishing him resolutely in the saṃsāric world as a constant exemplar of the dharmic teaching. Vimalakīrti stands at the critical point of juncture between a cosmic order and a conventional one, acting as a living embodiment of Nāgārjuna's two truths, ultimate and relative. His life, though immediately accessible to a layman of Vaiśālī, constantly intimates the greater ontological order, like

a palimpsest slowly wearing away to reveal an older metaphysical truth.

The chief rhetorical mode of the VNS is, of course, verbal. But alongside the various dialogues, and running all through them like a philosophical illumination, is a visual rhetoric of equal force, a rhetoric of spectacle. Like any type of *upāya*, this visual rhetoric exhibits a finely-tuned dispositionality, conforming itself to the contours of its karmic environment and appearing differently to each beholder. Moreover, this dispositionality seems to be a function of the pedagogical situation or encounter *itself*, not merely a skill the upāyic teacher has learned. In this and other ways, the miracles of the text display a structure and necessity of their own, hinting that *māyā*, even as illusion, must in due course have a certain logic.

Philosophically, however, this possibility is never addressed. Emptiness becomes a way of describing the *mode* of appearance, not its ontological status. And this emphasis on modality is perfectly consonant with the upāyic methods of the *bodhisattva*, for philosophical constructs cannot, we are told, capture reality.

The VNS is eminently a teaching in motion, a text which unfolds as much through its plot events as through the dialogues of its protagonists. To grasp its philosophical orientation correctly it is essential to give due weight to the narrative and aesthetic structures which underrun it. And it is this quality—an artistic quality, to put it most simply—which sets the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in a class of its own, making it one of the most enjoyable Mahāyāna texts to read and reflect upon. To the very extent that it can draw us in with its beauty and humanity, its own upāyic power stands undiminished by time.

NOTES

1. In the use of these terms I mean to suggest that the predominantly *visual* materials of the text—particularly, of course, the moments of magical *upāya*—are governed by a logic of persuasion much as are the verbal dialogues. This position is inevitable if one accepts the upāyic intentionality of the spectacle—a hardly radical position in light of the fact that each major spectacle is followed by a report of religious epiphanies experienced by its beholders.

In referring to the “discursive” rhetoric of the text, I mean the text’s verbal elements taken in the widest sense: philosophical discourses, laudatory

verses, tales, and even the Goddess's playful jibes at Śāriputra.

2. The VNS does not survive in Sanskrit; it is generally felt that the canonical Tibetan version gives the most coherent and fluent reading among the surviving editions. In what follows I have adopted two systems for identifying textual references. In cases where R. Thurman's lucid translation, *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, seems to me to capture the sense of the Tibetan accurately, I will cite passages in the form (Th xx), with xx representing a page number from his translation. In cases where I disagree with Thurman's reading or wish to highlight a grammatical point, I will give either the Tibetan text in romanization followed by a page reference to Jisshu Oshika's critical edition (see Bibliography), or simply an Oshika reference with no text. References to other canonical and secondary works are given in endnotes.

3. L. Hurvitz, tr. *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: 1976) 22–25 *et passim*.

4. *Ibid.*, 58–83.

5. *Ibid.*, 60–61.

6. For a more detailed discussion of visual illusion in Mahāyāna sūtras see my paper, "Discourse in the Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (11:1983), section one. For a representative Hindu parallel of the "doubled cosmos" motif, see W. O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities* (Chicago: 1984) 103–109.

7. Cf. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* (New York: 1960) 60. Eliade stressed throughout his work the connection between the *axis mundi* concept and the myth of paradise, a resonance which is perhaps not out of place in the present text.

8. The text tells us that Śāriputra's skepticism regarding the purity of the magically-revealed *buddha*-field arises "by the power (*anubhāva*) of the Buddha" (*sang rgyas kyi mthus*; Osh 153). This is the exact phrase used earlier to account for the creation of the spectacle in the first place. It cannot be determined from the text whether the repetition of this phrase is meant to imply that the Buddha, in a new act of magical manipulation, has put the thought into Śāriputra's mind, or whether the reference simply points backward to the initial creation of the spectacle. Thurman opts for the former reading; but if an act of overt thought-control is suggested here it is difficult to explain why the Buddha must then read Śāriputra's thought telepathically (*yongs su rlog pa thugs kyis mkhyen*; Osh 153).

9. Compare the vanishing Buddha in the Rāvaṇa chapter of the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*; cf. my 1983 paper, *op. cit.*, pp. 270–275, for an analysis.

10. See O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: 1976) 1–3.

11. *Ibid.*, 139–140.

12. Hamlin, *op. cit.*, 277–8.

13. The reluctance stories effectively convey Vimalakīrti's ability to adjust his *upāya* to the disposition of his auditor. Thus, his challenges to the *śrāvakas* are geared to vinayic issues, right views and conduct in saṃsāric life. By contrast, his lectures to the *bodhisattvas* chiefly concern nirvāṇic ideas. Verbally, then, Vimalakīrti's *upāya* reflects the same "dispositionality" we found

in the Buddha's magic.

Thurman's and Lamotte's endnotes to these vignettes detail the subtle ways in which the sermons and challenges are adjusted to legendary attributes of the characters involved: thus, to choose but one example, the well-known ascetic Mahākāśyapa is attacked by Vimalakīrti explicitly on the grounds of the worthlessness of austerities (Th 26–7, 116). [Yet, see following note.]

14. But if the power of upāyic magic is regulated in some sense by *karma*, what is its actual origin? The close of Chapter Six gives a surprising answer, albeit a partial one. Vimalakīrti asserts that all the Māras and beggars who accost a *bodhisattva* are in fact other *bodhisattvas* who, wearing an upāyic disguise, come to test the resolve of their peers. Their power is said to arise from their "terrible austerities" (Th 55). Common people (*phal po che*) never have the ability (or authority; *mtshu*) to trouble a *bodhisattva*.

This seems a rather strange passage for a Mahāyāna text devoted to extolling the career of a worldly *bodhisattva*. It resonates deeply, however, with the timeless Indian image of the ascetic, the *tapasvīn* whose austerities heat up Indra's throne when they become too great. As King Duśyanta in Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalā* puts it,

Ascetics devoted to peace
possess a fiery hidden power,
like smooth crystal sunstones
that reflect the sun's scorching rays.

[B.S. Miller, tr. *Theater of Memory:
The Plays of Kālidāsa* (New York: 1984) 105]

Vimalakīrti is no forest-dwelling yogi, but we should remember that he is, in the literal sense, chaste. The *bodhisattva*'s austerities not only grant him the power to manipulate *māyā* but also protect him from the corruptive force of the multitude—a statement with which apologists for many religions might concur. At this formative stage of the Mahāyāna, then, we see that insight alone is not felt to be a sufficient explanation for the *bodhisattva*'s extraordinary attainments; there still lingers the idea of the hermit who buys his attainments with a pound of flesh, even if the rigors of such a course are only sketched in passing.

15. The ontic (*ontisch*) / ontological (*ontologisch*) distinction is borrowed here from Heidegger. In general terms, the *ontic* is that which pertains to the lived phenomenal world *as lived*; it implicitly assumes the experiential immediacy of entities encountered "in the world." The *ontological*, on the other hand, pertains to any attempt to articulate the conditions for the possibility of this immediacy of being—namely, the essential structure of the "real." For Madhyamaka metaphysics, of course, the key ontological truth is emptiness. To say, "I see a miracle!" is to make an ontic statement; to say "Miracles are founded on emptiness" is to invoke the ontological. Ontic awareness—Heidegger's "everydayness" (*Alltäglichkeit*)—assumes without question the reality of experienced things: this is the error (*bhrānta*) of the common man, according to Buddhism. For Heidegger, the philosopher describes a circular movement

from this naïve awareness to a theoretical awareness or ontology, then back again to the ontic. The *bodhisattva* doctrine of the VNS, with its insistence on the *bodhisattva's* return to the world, makes a similar circular movement—though rather than founding its ontology on the doctrine of Being (*Sein*), as Heidegger does, its reposes itself on emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

For a discussion of the ontic and the ontological, see John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, tr. *Being and Time* (Harper and Row, 1962) pp. 31–5 + ff.

16. Hurvitz, *op. cit.*, 200–1.

17. Thurman's "concealing his miraculous powers" is absent from the Tibetan recension at my disposal (Osh 218).

18. This stock aside occurs in several texts. See, for example, *Avadānāśatakam* (Suprabhā story, 4.4) and *Divyāvadāna* (133.9 and 192.8).

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