

Themes from the Vimalakirti Nirdesa: a Mahayana Buddhist Text

This lecture series, given in 1979, was Sangharakshita's last and is considered by many to be his best. It is a brilliant blend of conceptual exposition, imagery, humour, and insight - a fitting commentary to Thurman's translation of a marvellous text.

Primary Study Material

The Primary study material for this term is *The Inconceivable Emancipation: Themes from the Vimalakirti Nirdesa* by Sangharakshita (Windhorse). The original lectures can also be accessed from www.freebuddhistaudio.com/. Note that the published version has been augmented by question and answer material and therefore represents an expansion of the original lectures. You are also strongly advised to read the original scripture alongside the lectures.

1. **The Magic of a Mahayana Sutra.**
2. **Building The Buddhaland.**
3. **On Being All Things to All Men.**
4. **The Transcendental Critique of Religion.**
5. **History Versus Myth in Man's Quest for Meaning.**
6. **The Way of Non-duality.**
7. **The Mystery of Human Communication.**
8. **The Four Great Reliances: Criteria For The Spiritual Life.**

Suggested Further Reading

The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti, trans. by R.A.F. Thurman, (Pennsylvania State University, 1976). Recent edition published by Motilal Banarsidass (India).
The Eternal Legacy by Sangharakshita, (Windhorse) C8 & C11.
A Concise History of Buddhism by Andrew Skilton, (Windhorse 1994) C11-13.

Suggested Further Reading by Unit

U2: *Mahayana Buddhism* by Paul Williams, Routledge 1989, pp. 224-228; *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* by David Snellgrove, Serindia 1987, pp.109-111.
U3: *The Skill in Means Sutra*, trans. Mark Tatz, Motilal Banarsidass 1994.
Snellgrove, op.cit. pp.66-71.

U4: *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition* by Subhuti, Windhorse 1994, C2; *Snellgrove*, op.cit. pp.23-9.

U5: *A Vision of History* by Sangharakshita, Dharmachakra Tapes, no. 136, *Buddhism and the Language of Myth* by Sangharakshita, Dharmachakra Tapes, no. 37, *The Mythic Context* by Subhuti, Padmaloka Books

U7: *Sangharakshita* by Subhuti, op.cit. C7

U8: *The Meaning of Orthodoxy in Buddhism* by Sangharakshita, Windhorse; *Who is the Buddha?* by Sangharakshita, Windhorse 1994, C5.

Study Questions

Unit 1 The Magic of a Mahayana Sutra

1. 'Every moment of our lives is unique.' (p.5) Reflect on the implications of this.
2. Based on Sangharakshita's summary and your reading so far, how would you characterise the Vimalakirti Nirdesha?
3. On page 7, Sangharakshita records the Four Great Bodhisattva Vows. Is it realistic for an individual to think in terms of fulfilling these?
4. How do you respond to Mahayana Sutras? Do they inspire you?
5. What is meant by vimoksha here? How do you characterise the spiritual goal?
6. What does it mean to say that spiritual freedom is acintya (inconceivable)?
7. 'We don't know anything about anything.' (p.14). What does Sangharakshita mean by this? Do you agree?
8. How do magical acts illustrate the nature of the Dharma?

Unit 2 Building the Buddha Land

1. In your own words, what is a Buddha Land?
2. What is the Dharmakaya?
3. What does Sangharakshita mean by the 'cosmic bodhicitta' here?
4. Reflect on the story of the fish woman. Can you identify anything analogous to it in your own experience?
5. Why can't a bodhisattva keep people in the pure land? What does this mean in practical terms?
6. 'You cannot really help yourself without helping others, and you cannot really help others without helping yourself.' (p.36) What does this mean and do you agree with it?

7. In what way is a Buddha land built from living beings?
8. In what ways is our relationship with the world essentially creative?

Unit 3 On Being 'All Things to All Men'

1. What is meant by skilful means in the context of Mahayana Buddhism? Does it have any application in your life?
2. Reflect and comment on your practice of any one of the four Samghrahavastus.
3. In your own words, give an account of one of the four Pratisamvids.
4. Why might it be misleading to think of Vimalakirti as a layman?
5. Do you think it is realistic to think in terms of 'being all things to all men' (and women!)?
6. Comment on the relationship between commitment and lifestyle in terms of your own spiritual life.

Unit 4 The Transcendental Critique of Religion

1. What is meant by vimutti in the context of spiritual life?
2. What are the consequences of religion becoming an end in itself?
3. What is the transcendental critique of religion?
4. Do you agree that the impact of reality is shattering? Why should this be?
5. In what circumstances is it appropriate to criticise others (c.f.71)?
6. Who or what might an encounter with Vimalakirti represent in the context of your own spiritual life?
7. In what way might sin function as a stumbling block in spiritual life? Do you have any experience of this?
8. How could you apply the transcendental critique to your own life?
9. 'Renunciation consists in the development of the Bodhicitta.' (p.76) What does this mean?

Unit 5 History Versus Myth in Humanity's Quest for Meaning

1. What might grace mean in the context of Buddhism. Do you have any experience of this?
2. 'Opposition is true friendship.' What do you think this quote from Blake means and do you agree with it?
3. How can our enemies be our true friends?
4. To what extent do you experience your life in terms of myth?

5. Do you agree that if you take myths literally 'you are likely to practise your religion more zealously.'? (p.94).
6. What is the difference between history and myth?
7. Summarise and comment on some of the features of the Mahayana as identified in this unit.
8. What is meant by archetypal reality? (p.97)
9. In your own experience, in what might the 'marriage' between Vimalakirti and Manjushri consist?

Unit 6 The Way of Non-Duality

1. Can you think of any analogues of Shariputra's problem in your own life?
2. In the context of spiritual life, what does becoming androgynous mean?
3. 'The Dharma is a means of entrance into ultimate truth when it is approached as a means to an end, but it shuts you out from ultimate truth when it is taken as an end in itself.' (p.107) Comment on this.
4. What does the character of Shariputra represent in the context of the Vimalakirti Nirdesha?
5. In what sense is the Dharma 'non-dual'?
6. 'Only transcendental individuality is strong enough to resist the pressure, to remain unaffected by the group's opinion.' (p.111) Reflect on this and identify some of its implications in your own life.
7. In what way are concepts essentially 'dualistic'?

Unit 7 The Mystery of Human Communication

1. 'A disciplined life gives strength.' (p.118) Comment on this.
2. 'Buddhism is a middle way between the extreme of authoritarianism and the extreme of individualistic thinking for oneself.' (p.119) Comment on how you might apply this understanding in practice.
3. Comment on the symbolic meaning of the universe sarvagandhasugandha.
4. Reflect and comment on the spiritual meaning of the food eating episode.
5. What does it mean to say that ultimate reality perfumes conditioned existence?
6. 'It is important, therefore, that we acquire new senses and new means of communication.' (p.131) How could you put this into practice?

Unit 8 The Four Great Reliances: Criteria for the Spiritual Life

1. Reflect and comment on the characterisation of the Buddha given by Vimalakirti on p.91-2 of the scripture (pp.135-6 in the Inconceivable Emancipation).
2. How do we determine the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma?
3. How is the Dharma to be *applied* according to the Dharma?
4. What dangers might arise from relying upon authority in the context of spiritual life?
5. How do we practise reliance upon the meaning rather than the expression of the Dharma?
6. How would you go about determining what is a teaching of explicit and what implicit meaning?
7. Reflect on and clarify the distinction between jnana and vijnana.

This material was originally compiled by Nagapriya for the distance-learning version of the Mitra Study Course and has subsequently been edited and updated by Saccanama.