Vimalakīrti's Aporia:
Chiasmus & Apophasis in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

SHI, Huifēng

Assistant Professor, Department of Buddhist Studies, Fo Guang University

Abstract

This study examines *aporia* paradox in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. We apply two methodological approaches, chiastic structures and apophatic rhetorical discourse, to examine three pairs of key passages in the text.

The Buddha's revelation of His Buddha field (pure land) to Śāriputra in Chp. 1 of the text, and descriptions of the layman lead character Vimalakīrti in Chp. 2-3, have often been used to support claims of lay over renunciant roles in early Mahāyāna Buddhism vis-à-vis Hīnayāna Buddhism. Amidst these is a description of the Tathāgata's body. Taking the text as a whole, however, reveals another display of Akṣobhya's field Abhirati at the end of the text, immediately following a radically different description of Vimala-kīrti's identity and the Tathāgata's body. This latter material, all in Chp. 11, has received much less attention than the aforementioned in the text's inter-pretation.

In order to understand the text as a whole, we propose that both of these portions be simultaneously taken into consideration. Comparing the relevant passages in Chp. 1-2 and Chp. 11 reveals chiastic inverted parallelism, formed in two opposing and complementary halves, which we shall read

synoptically. Moreover, the mode of rhetorical discourse in these passages also shifts between the two halves of the text. The former half utilizes juxtaposed affirmative statements which accord with traditional Buddhism systems of thought. The latter half then negates these juxtaposed systems through performance of an apophatic "meaning event", which directly confronts the original *aporia* paradox of the doctrines in question.

The inverted parallelism of the text's chiastic structure is thus matched by the inverted parallelism of its apophatic rhetorical mode of discourse. The two methodological approaches can be seen as complementary critical and hermeneutical methods for such a text and its teachings. The implications for an overall interpretation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*'s key themes include a challenge to the readings of Vimalakīrti's layman status, and the immanence of the Buddha field. We end with a hypothesis of what the remaining center of the text should hold on the basis of our ascertained chiastic and apophatic parallelism.

維摩詰之難題：
《維摩詰經》中之交錯結構與否定論述

釋慧峰

佛光大學佛教學系助理教授

中文摘要

本研究考察《維摩詰經》（*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*）中的難題悖論（*aporia paradox*），運用兩種方法：「交錯結構」（chiastic structures）與「否定性的修辭論述」（apophatic rhetorical discourse），來探究本經中的三對重要文段。

在本經的〈第一品〉中，一則文段解釋佛陀為舍利弗示現其佛國（淨土），以及在〈第二品〉與〈第三品〉中，另一則文段描述主角維摩詰居士，此文段常被學者引用來支持本經大乘佛教居士身分勝過於小乘佛教出家角色的宣稱立場。於兩則文段之間也有一段內容描述如來身。但是，從此部經的整體立場來看，在經的末端另有一段描述示現阿閦佛的妙喜佛國，緊接著這段就是如上所說的維摩詰身分與如來身的描述。而在詮釋整部經的學說上，將這些全出自於〈第十一品〉的內容與頭兩品相比較，〈第十一品〉所受到的研究關注相對較少。

為了對本經有整體性的瞭解，我們主張前後兩部份需要同時被考量。若將〈第一品〉、〈第二品〉與〈第十一品〉的相關文段來比對，可看出本經具有倒轉駢行的「交錯結構」（chiasmus），有彼此呼應的

兩半，是需要對觀式（synoptic）的解讀。還有，兩則中的修辭論述方式又在前文與後文之間是倒過來的。前半採用並列肯定性（affirmative）的陳述，是合乎主流部派佛教思想體系；後半反而透過一種否定性（apophatic）的「意義事件」（meaning event）來否定（negate）前面的並列體系，是直接對抗前半所論教理之原有難題悖論（*aporia paradox*）。

因此，本經交錯結構的倒轉駢行性是相對於其否定性修辭方式論述的倒轉駢行性。這兩種方法可被視為經文結構與其教理內容的兩個互相支持的文本批評與教理詮釋方法。對於《維摩詰經》主旨之全面性理解而言，這意味著挑戰維摩詰只是居士身分以及佛國就是內在性的這兩個學說。最後，我們依於已確認的交錯與否定性的駢行而提出待研究的經典中段部分之一些假說想法。

關鍵詞：《維摩詰經》，交錯結構，否定論述，佛國，維摩詰，如來身體

1. Structure & Rhetoric in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

A joke:

Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti walk into a bar.
Mañjuśrī is silent.
Vimalakīrti turns to him and says:
"Why didn't you just say so?"

We confess that we cannot provide a citation for this joke. It is our own poor creation. Still, we feel confident that many would agree if we described the famous Mahayana sūtra the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as "*Prajñā-pāramitā* with jokes". One of the most well-known rhetorical features of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature is a formulation of the structure "XY is not Y" or "XY is Y-less", which juxtaposes affirmation of some doctrinal category or topic (XY or Y) with its negation (~Y). We have also recently demonstrated that in addition to this micro level rhetorical formulation of affirmation and negation, the earliest *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*s also display macro level inverted parallelism through their chiastic textual structure.[1] We believe that this micro level rhetorical formulation and macro level textual structure comple-ment each other, and are both reflections of an underlying philosophical concern of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, namely the transcendence of duality. This, too, would appear to be the main concern of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, albeit with more humor. We do not believe this humor to be merely extrinsic to the main theme, however, but likewise intrinsic to the rhetoric of the text. Michael A. SELLS, in his seminal work on apophatic discourse titled *Mystical*

[1]   SHÌ Huìfēng, *Chiasmus in the Early Prajñāpāramitā: Literary Parallelism Connecting Criticism & Hermeneutics in an Early Mahāyāna Sūtra* (University of Hong Kong, PhD Dissertation, 2012).

Languages of Unsaying, also illustrates how jokes are analogous to the "anarchic" moment of such religious rhetoric, the "meaning event" wherein transcendence is actually performed.[2]

Joking aside, the very serious intention of this essay is to follow up on our earlier suspicions that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* may also thus be chiastic in structure,[3] combined with many of Sells' insights into apophatic discourse which he rightly points out as a key feature of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*.[4] These are thus the two methodological approaches that we shall use in this short study: chiasmus methodology in terms of textual structure, which we shall discuss below in §2, Chiastic Structure in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*; and apophatic rhetoric as a type of transcendental discourse, to be detailed in §3, Apophatic Rhetoric in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Together, we can also consider these two approaches in terms of a more traditional combination, i.e. textual criticism followed by hermeneutics, as any serious consideration of either one must include an examination of the other. Our two methodological approaches cannot be applied mechanically to any text or discourse, however, as such structures may only be required when a particular dilemma of transcendence is present. As such, we must begin from Vimalakīrti's *aporia*, the paradox or dilemma posed by the text, before we can discuss its resolution.

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[2] Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 210; see also Williams, "The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*: The Comedy of Paradox." *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies, New Series* 6 (1990).

[3] Shì Huìfēng, *Chiasmus in the Early Prajñāpāramitā*, 387f.

[4] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 4. D'Amato also mentions Sells' theory of apophasis, though he does not reference the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* as a specific example, in D'Amato, "Buddhism, Apophasis, Truth." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 9.2 (2008).

1.1 Vimalakīrti's Aporia

The term "*aporia*" (Greek: ἀπορία), is etymologically derived from the negating prefix "*a-*", and the stem "*poros*" meaning "passage", and thus literally "impasse" or "difficulty". Philosophically speaking, it refers to a state of perplexity in the face of a question or line of reason that cannot be resolved under the given circumstances.[5] For example, the *aporia* of the "One" and "Being" in early Christian mysticism as it became imbued with Neo-Platonic thought: how could the One be endowed with an attribute such as Being, which would imply that Non-Being was outside the One, making the latter itself not complete and whole.[6] SELLS explains that the mode of mystical "discourse begins with the *aporia*—the unresolvable dilemma—of transcendence".[7] He considers that there are at least three basic responses to such a dilemma:[8]

> The first is silence. The second response is to distinguish between ways in which the transcendent is beyond names and ways in which it is not. … The third response begins with the refusal to solve the dilemma … accepted as genuine *aporia,* that is, unresolvable; … a new mode of discourse.

Our usage of the term "*aporia*" in this essay follows this description by SELLS. Even a cursory acquaintance with the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* will quickly reveal that the last two responses are both utilized, and the text also states

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[5] NAILS, "Socrates", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition).

[6] FRANKE, *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts, Vol. 1* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 20, 25.

[7] SELLS, *Mystical Languages*, 2.

[8] SELLS, *Mystical Languages*, 2.

that "Then, the Licchavi Vimalakīrti was silent" (§8.33 *atha vimalakīrtir licchavis tūṣṇīm abhūt*). But what is the *aporia*—the unresolvable dilemma of transcendence—that Vimalakīrti faces? What is this text's ultimate concern? In Buswell and Lopez's recently published *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* entry for the text, several core themes are given:[9]

> The *sūtra* is widely quoted in later literature, especially on the topics of emptiness, method, and non-duality. It became particularly famous in East Asia because the protagonist is a layman, who repeatedly demonstrates that his wisdom is superior to that of monks.

Philosophically, Buddhists have long been challenged by what appeared to many as the paradox between the notions of impermanence and insubstantiality—emptiness—on one hand, with the notion of ongoing continuous cyclic existence on the other. The classic solution is the "middle way" (*madhyamapratipad*), a freedom from dualistic extreme views, which is the precursor to our text's non-duality (*advaya*). This feature of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* has led Mather, for instance, to claim the Chapter on Duality as the "climax of the *sutra*", with its use of "bold paradoxes".[10] In this way it is akin to the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.

Sociologically, the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* has long been seen to champion the lay bodhisattva as the equal, or even better, of the (*śrāvaka*) renunciant.[11]

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[9] Buswell & Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 971.

[10] Mather, "Vimalakirti and gentry Buddhism", *History of Religions: An International Journal for Comparative Historical Studies* 8 (1968), 65, 70.

[11] For example, Williams, "The *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*: The Comedy of Paradox", 91; Though this is challenged by Silk, "Taking the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Seriously", *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology*,

This is seen in its introduction and acceptance among the literati of ancient China, which a number of scholars have discussed in detail.[12] HARRISON notes that for "Western Buddhists with strong democratic and anti-hierarchical tendencies … the spirit of Vimalakīrti is invoked to legitimate all types of Buddhist involvement and degrees of commitment".[13] The text is also often invoked by modern Buddhist advocates of gender equality for similar reasons.[14]

Soteriologically, the text has also been used to advocate a particular interpretation of a "pure land", or more strictly speaking, a "Buddha field" (*buddhakṣetra*). Based on a statement in Chp. 1 of the text, "Because to the extent that the mind of a bodhisattva is pure is his Buddha field pure", a tendency toward a "this world" interpretation is shown, contra Buddha fields

Vol. XVII (2014): 159ff, 173f; who also cites other scholars. Also compare with COLE, *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahayana Buddhist Literature* (University of California Press, 2005), 252; though we do not share his overall paternal interpretation.

[12] See ZÜRCHER, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: the spread and adaptation of Buddhism in early medieval China* (Brill, 2007), 131-132; MATHER, "Vimalakirti and gentry Buddhism", 73; also DEMIEVILLE, "Vimalakirti in China." *Buddhist Studies Review* 21.2 (2004).

[13] HARRISON, "Searching for the origins of the Mahāyāna: what are we looking for?" *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies: Vol. III, The origins and nature of Mahāyāna Buddhism; Some Mahāyāna religious topics* (2005), 171f; see also BOUCHER, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna: A Study and Translation of the Rāṣṭrapālaparipṛcchā-sūtra* (University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 194.

[14] For example, in SHUSTER, "Changing the Female Body: Wise Women and the Bodhisattva Career in Some *Mahāratnakūṭasūtra*s." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4.1 (1981); also GROSS, "The Dharma of Gender." *Contemporary Buddhism* 5.1 (2004); and to a lesser extent, SILK, "Taking the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Seriously" (2014): 169ff. Again COLE, *Text as Father*, 236ff.

as "other worlds".[15] One may equate, or at least parallel, these dual categories with the notions of *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the non-difference of which was an important Mahāyāna theme. Both of these are directly connected to Buddhology proper, i.e. concepts of Buddhahood, which in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is also expressed as the "body of the Tathāgata" (*tathāgatakāya*).

The above examples are only some of the plethora of dualisms and paradoxes that the text confronts, Vimalakīrti's *aporia*. We have unfortunately neither the time nor space to cover them all, but suffice for now to say that in the face of such perplexities most commentators—ancient or modern—have chosen the second type of response described by SELLS, that is, attempting to answer in a logical or rational manner as to in what sense something is and in what sense not. For example, the common position that Vimalakīrti *is* a layman, and that the Buddha field *is not* some other world. Many interpreters will break the discourse of the text up in various levels or strata of truth, resolving surface contradictions by claiming that while a statement may be false on one level, it is true on another level. Here, one side of the initial dilemma or paradox is favored, and *aporia* is thus transformed to kataphatic discourse supplemented by (often apologetic) apophatic methodology.

Our aim here, however, is to take seriously what SELLS considers to be the third possible response to *aporia*, that is, to accept Vimalakīrti's paradox as genuine and unresolvable by conventional discourse. We shall thus focus on several of these paradoxical issues, namely the status of a "Tathāgata body", their "Buddha fields", and Vimalakīrti's own identity. Before this, however, we must return to explain our methodological positions in more

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15   For example, in CHANDLER, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization* (University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 47, 50ff.

depth, i.e. text structural chiasmus and apophatic discourse.

1.2 Two Locations & Paired Names of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

Before we delve into our specific case examples, however, some general considerations of inverted parallel structure and rhetorical discourse within the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* are called for. Here, we shall draw mainly from the work of Étienne LAMOTTE's studies in his translation of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, entitled *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti*, which is in turn translated from his original French version, *L'Enseignement de Vimalakīrti*.[16] While this is by no means the most recent study and translation of the text,[17] LAMOTTE's erudition still stands strong. His *Introduction* is a detailed essay, and while the translation is based on the Tibetan, the Chinese versions have been amply considered, especially that of Xüánzàng. One obvious criticism would be LAMOTTE's lack of consultation with the Sanskrit manuscript, which has only since been discovered and made available in both a diplomatic and multilingual synoptic edition and a subsequent critical edition, by the STUDY GROUP ON BUDDHIST SANSKRIT LITERATURE at Taishō University.[18] Our

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[16]   LAMOTTE, *L'Enseignement de Vimalakīrti* (Louvain, 1962); and LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti* (Pali Text Society, 1976).

[17]   Other English language translations include: LUK, *Ordinary Enlightenment: A Translation of the Vimalakirti Nirdesa* (Shambala, 2002); THURMAN, *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśasūtra* (Pennsylvania University Press, 1976); and WATSON, *The Vimalakirti Sutra* (Columbia University Press, 1996). NATTIER has written an excellent review comparing the four, in NATTIER, "Book Review: The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*): A Review of Four English Translations." *Buddhist Literature* (2000).

[18]   STUDY GROUP ON BUDDHIST SANSKRIT LITERATURE, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: Transliterated Sanskrit Text Collated with Tibetan and Chinese Translations* (Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, The Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism,

study here will use our own translations of this Sanskrit text, with further reference to the Chinese and Tibetan translations.[19] Very recently Silk has also examined the popularity of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in terms of its plot structure. But while the description of classic Aristotelian dramatic plot bears some resemblance to chiasmus, his own analysis of the text still struggles to fully correspond to this classic structure.[20] A point that we also take very seriously, though, is Silk's insistence that "the key lies not in the individual elements or units of the scripture but in the overall way these are put together".[21]

With respect to the structure of the text, Lamotte produces one helpful table of the "Divisions of the [*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*]"—the chapters—according to the three extant Chinese translations, and another table with the chapter

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Taishō University, Tokyo, 2004); Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: A Sanskrit Edition Based upon the Manuscript Newly Found at the Potala Palace* (Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, The Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism, Taishō University, Tokyo, 2006).

[19] Chinese, in chronological order of translation: 1. Zhī Qiān 支謙 (A.D. 223-228) 佛說維摩詰經 *Weímójié Jīng* (**Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*), in T474. 2. Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (A.D. 406), 維摩詰所說經 *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng* (**Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*), in T475. 3. Sēngzhaò 僧肇 (A.D. 406), 注維摩詰經 *Zhù Weímójié Jīng* (*Notes to the* **Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*), in T1775. 4. Xúanzàng 玄奘 (A.D. 650), 說無垢稱經 *Shuō Wúgoùchēng Jīng* (**Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*), in T476. Tibetan: 1. Chos ñid tshul khrims (A.D. 8th cty?), *'Phags pa Dri med grags pas bstan pa źes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo* (Tibetan translation of *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*), in Kg, mdo sde, vol. ma, pp. 175a1-239b7. Refer Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, xxvi-liii, for a detailed examination of all the translations, extant and lost.

[20] Silk, "Taking the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Seriously" (2014): 171-172.

[21] Silk, "Taking the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Seriously" (2014): 161, 163. See also Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 131-132: "… both the narrative as a whole and the individual sections of dialogue have a certain dramatic tension …".

headings of the three Chinese and one Tibetan translation all back translated into Sanskrit.[22] Based on this, he goes on to discuss "The Localisation of the Vkn", noting how the plot moves the narratives through three key locations from start to end.[23] While LAMOTTE himself concludes that "In the mind of the Indian author, all these movements are purely fictitious: mere changes of décor to give more emphasis to the action and dialogue",[24] we do not think we should pass over this use of different spatial locations so lightly. Chiastic structures often follow a pattern of "coming" and "going", such as CAMPBELL's well known "hero's journey";[25] or the exile and return of the tribes of Israel;[26] or a temporal split, such as the alternating days and nights of the Iliad.[27] We shall also see below how apophatic rhetoric can transform temporal and spatial sense, which can be metaphorically described as a "from" and "to".[28]

The three locations in LAMOTTE's "localization" are the Āmrapālīvana in Vaiśalī, Vimalakīrti's house, and the Sarvagandhasugandhā world. The first two are the most frequently used, and other "worlds" are also revealed even if the plot narrative does not take the reader there per se. We can tabulate the narrative and locations as follows, renaming LAMOTTE's notation of I to VII to a more chiastic A-B-C-X-C'-B'-A', and with reference to the divisions of LAMOTTE's (1976) translation (Chp. §x.y).

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[22] LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, xcviiiff.

[23] LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, cff.

[24] LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, ci.

[25] CAMPBELL, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Pantheon Books, 1949), 30.

[26] DOUGLAS, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition* (Yale University Press, 2007), xiv.

[27] DOUGLAS, *Thinking in Circles*, 101ff; 115ff.

[28] SELLS, *Mystical Languages*, 213.

▪Figure 1 Lamotte's "Localization" of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

A Āmrapālīvana (***Prologue***) Chp. §1.1-1.20. The Buddha & Ratnākara ↓	↑ Āmrapālīvana (***Conclusion***) **A'** Chp. §10.1-12.23. Ratnacchattra Avadāna	
B Vimalakīrti's house Chp. §2.1-3.1. Description of Lay Vimalakīrti ↓	↑ Vimalakīrti's house **B'** Chp. §9.9-9.18. Sacred Meal and the Sāhā World	
C Āmrapālīvana Chp. §3.2-4.2. Śrāvakas & Bodhisattvas ↓	↑ Sarvagandhasugandhā world **C'** Chp. §9.5-9.8. Manifestation Bodhisattvas	
X Vimalakīrti's house (***Central Turning Point***) Chp. §4.3-9.4. Teachings on Inconceivable Liberation, Non-duality, etc.		

Shown in this manner, it is suggestive that vis-à-vis locations the text may have a fairly straightforward inverted parallel structure. (See Safavi and Weightman for a possible solution to the mismatch at C-C'.[29]) Therefore, contra Lamotte, we do not believe that the locations are "purely fictitious: mere changes of décor", but are in fact a meaningful case of the general paradoxical and dualistic thought underlying the whole text, manifested here in spatial form. While the table above is insufficient to discuss, let alone conclude on, the significance of such spatial parallelism, nonetheless, we are now duly notified as to its possible presence.

While the above structure of the narrative locations suggesting a kind

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[29] Safavi & Weightman, *Rumi's Mystical Design: Reading the Mathnawi, Book One* (State University of New York, 2010), 52f.

of spatial dualism within the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* may be a hitherto unnoticed feature, the text's own method of apophatic discourse is well known as one of its more striking features. We would first like to draw attention to a number of the various names given to the text itself. The commonly used "*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*", i.e. "the teaching of Vimalakīrti", or similar, including variants in Chinese or Tibetan, is merely one name among many, based on the illustrious main character. Other names refer to various specific teaching contained within, such as the "*Acintyavimokṣanirdeśa*", i.e. "the teaching on inconceivable liberation", or variants. A much less known title, well pointed out by Lamotte, unknown to the Chinese and only appearing in the Tibetan and Sanskrit (the latter text being unknown to Lamotte, of course), is the "*Yamakapuṭavyatyastanihāra*", Tib: *Phrugs su sbyar ba snrel źi(ṅ) mṅon par bsgrub pa*. This name appears in Chp. §12.23, at the very end of the text, though there is a mention of the very similar "*yamakavyatyastanihāra*" in Chp. §12.17. Lamotte translates this phrase as "the production of paired and inverted (sounds)", and we believe he is quite right in stating that it is with reference to "linguistic or rhetorical processes and figures of style".[30] Thurman, also translating from the Tibetan, renders it as "the reconciliation of dichotomies".[31] While our recently discovered Sanskrit manuscript differs ever so slightly, the meaning is still clear, and our own translation of the Sanskrit would be "emittance of paired inversions". The more commonly used name "Inconceivable Liberation" also suggests to us the transcendence of the dichotomy of affirming versus negating statements inherent in all language, and the notion that "the subject of discourse is a non-object and no-

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[30] Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, lviff.
[31] Thurman, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*, 101.

thing".[32] We can thus see that even the name of the text according to the later traditions explicitly acknowledge the importance of resolution of inverted dualism as a key theme.

We are now prepared to examine some specific case examples to flesh out the exact content of how this works within the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* itself. The following two sections of our essay will cover "Chiastic Structure in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*" (§2) and "Apophatic Rhetoric in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*" (§3) respectively. Each section will first discuss in detail the methodology involved, before showing its application to the text.

2. Chiastic Structure in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

In describing structural types that may become apparent when a classical text is analyzed, Dorsey outlines three basic patterns as follows:[33] 1. Linear: A-B-C…|. 2. Parallelism: A-B-C… | A'-B'-C'…. 3. Symmetry or inverted parallelism: A-B-C… | …C'-B'-A'. Parallelism and symmetry may also have a unique element "X" which occurs at the center or at the end. Such structures may be on a small scale, e.g. across a verse or sub-chapter, or large enough to span an entire text.

Large scale symmetrical structures include what are known as "chiasmus", "pedimental", "step", or "ring" compositional forms. Here we shall use the term "chiasmus" and adjective "chiastic", which derive from the Greek letter χ (pronounced "*chi*"), equating to the English letter "X", which represents the symmetrical *cross*-over point (X) of the two sides of

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32 Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 4.

33 Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament* (Baker Book House, 1999), 26-32.

the structure.[34] This is the basic structure, though very complex forms can develop, such as smaller rings within larger rings. According to WELCH, "chiasmus is therefore a significant ordering principle within, not only verses and sentences, but also within and throughout whole books and extensive poetical units, whose dimensions are indeed virtually unlimited."[35] For our study here, the key point is that chiasmus is a split, bipartite structure, that we could call text structural dualism.

In terms of the range of this structural form, despite WELCH's claim that chiasmus "can now be said that one of the most salient developments in the study of ancient literature over the past few decades",[36] he does so largely with respect to the Bible and other classics of Western civilization, which abound in chiasmus. Beyond this cultural sphere, chiasmus is also a feature of Indo-European literature, such as Zoroastrian Gāthā, and in India "it occurs in literature both earlier and later than the *Upaniṣads*. This form of composition does not appear only in poetic or even only in literary works".[37] We believe that our own study on chiasmus in the *Prajñāpāramitā* is the first such examination of a Buddhist text.[38]

The value of this split textual dualism between the juxtaposed parallel

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[34] WELCH, *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analysis, Exegesis* (Research Press, 1981), 7; and SAFAVI & WEIGHTMAN, *Rumi's Mystical Design*, 52f.

[35] WELCH, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 11.

[36] WELCH, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 9.

[37] BRERETON, "Why is a sleeping dog like the Vedic Sacrifice?: The structure of an *Upaniṣadic Brahmodya*", *Inside the Texts / Beyond the Texts: New Approaches to Vedic Studies*, Dept. of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard. (1997): 5. One of the other few studies of chiasmus in Indian literature is BEHL and WEIGHTMAN, *Madhumālatī: an Indian Sufi Romance* (Oxford, 2000).

[38] SHÌ Huìfēng, *Chiasmus in the Early Prajñāpāramitā*.

halves is significant for religious or philosophical chiasmus. The "X" core of such structures holds a tenet or doctrine which is also chiastic in nature. LISSNER states that the "religious chiasticist often would exposit an intentional ambiguity or paradox of great import at the axial node of his structure's intercrossing lines"; and "a crucial rhetorical question can be hung in the air, emphatic negation or denial can be pitched, strong reversal and anti-thetical ideas mounted".[39] When a statement of affirmation is made in the first half, the second half of the chiasmus may respond with negation. "In the dissociative formulations of chiasmus, *not* is the predominate naysayer."[40] In a mystical sense, SAFAVI and WEIGHTMAN have succinctly described the reason for such chiastic structures in their recent ground breaking study of Rūmī's *Mathnawi* as follows:[41]

> Parallelism … permits nonlinear and nonlocal relationships, thus allowing [the text] to meet two of the criteria for the spiritual world, that of unity or unicity, in that every part of the poem is interconnected, and that of the reconciliation of opposites, in that opposites can be held in parallel for them then to be transcended at a higher level.

The reconciliation of opposites is the resolution of *aporia*. We will argue that chiasmus is a structural form to fit a rhetoric of dualism and opposites.

So the methodology says, and it is now up to us to apply it to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. Due to the size of the text, we shall only look at two parts

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[39] LISSNER, *Chi-Thinking: Chiasmus and Cognition* (PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, UMI, 2007), 226-7.

[40] LISSNER, *Chi-Thinking: Chiasmus and Cognition*, 394.

[41] SAFAVI & WEIGHTMAN, *Rumi's Mystical Design*, 6.

of the text, near the beginning and end, respectively. The first of the two key portions of the text concerned are to be found from §1.11 to §2.12 according to LAMOTTE's textual divisions. The second portion is near the very end of the text, from §11.1 to §11.9. In terms of overall position within the *Nirdeśa* as a whole, they are only preceded by the usual standard opening to the text (§1.1-10) and followed by the concluding chapter (§12), respectively. In terms of a potential chiastic structure, they are thus near to, or even an integral part of, the prologue and conclusion of the text which indicates its entire *raison d'être*.[42] The text's penultimate chapter named "Offering of Dharma" is an *Avadāna*. We have demonstrated in the chiastic structure of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* that its own *Avadāna*—an integral part of the structural whole—functions as "latch". Therefore, the *Sūtra's* concluding "entrustment" that corresponds to the actual prologue acts as a frame both before and after the *Avadāna* itself.[43] This may very well be a similar situation to the *Nirdeśa* here.

2.1 Śākyamuni's Buddha Field, a Tathāgata Body & Layman Vimalakīrti

The content of the first passages at the start of the text, §1.11 to §2.12, features several main themes. In particular, the themes of Śākyamuni's Buddha field and a description of the layman Vimalakīrti, along with a homily on a Tathāgata's body contrasted against the regular human body.

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[42] This is a slight difference to SĒNGZHAÒ's statement in his *Notes to the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, "This text begins with the Pure Land, and ends with the offering of the Dharma". SĒNGZHAÒ, *Zhù Weímójié Jīng* (*Notes to the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*), " 此經始 自于淨土。終于法供養。", CBETA, T38, no. 1775, p. 327, c26-27.

[43] SHÌ Huìfēng, *Chiasmus in the Early Prajñāpāramitā*, 265ff.

In §1.11, the Licchavi Ratnākara, having praised the Buddha, requests that He explain the bodhisattvas' "purification of the Buddha field" (*buddha-kṣetrapariśuddhir*). The Buddha's reply runs from §1.12-13, where many positive and wholesome Dharmas are given as the purification of the Buddha field, and then §1.14 functions as a kind of summary of much of this. The concluding relationship therein established, i.e. that a pure mind equates to a pure field, then leads Śāriputra to conclude that due to the impurity of the Sāhā world, Śākyamuni's own mind must not have been pure (§1.15). This conclusion is strongly rejected by the Brahmā Śikhin, who claims that the so-called impurity that Śāriputra perceives is due to impurity in Śāriputra's own mind (§1.16). Thereupon, Śākyamuni Himself, assenting to this claim, reveals His own Buddha field in glorious and splendid array (§1.17-18). Amazed, the audience attains various spiritual insights (§1.19-20) and the chapter ends.

Chp. 2 begins at a change of scene, Vimalakīrti's house in Vaiśalī (see §1.2 above). The first half of this chapter (§2.1-6) features the famous description of the Licchavi layman Vimalakīrti as the model resident of Vaiśalī, and his abundant virtues. In order to convert the citizens of Vaiśalī, he feigns sickness, so that they will visit him on his sick bed (§2.7). Vimalakīrti then launches into two homilies, the first on the transitory and altogether dissatisfactory nature of the human body (§2.8); and a second homily which is in order to inspire the listener to seek to attain the pure body of a Tathāgata, replete with infinite virtues (§2.9-12). Of those who hear these homilies, many aspire to full awakening (§2.13). Here, the second chapter ends, and along with it our first portion of the text that we will study at the start of the *Nirdeśa*.

2.2 Akṣobhya's Buddha Field, a Tathāgata Body & Alien Vimalakīrti

The second portion of text is found at the end of the *Nirdeśa* as already mentioned. However, having already noted the possibility of a chiastic structure, we must be cautious about the order of the material here which is possibly inverted with respect to that at the start of the text. While all in Chp. 11, we can also split this into two parts, namely, from §11.1 to §11.3, and from §11.3 to §11.9. These two parts also thematically match that found in the second half of Chapter One and in Chapter Two.

Chp. 11 begins Vimalakīrti's response to the Buddha on how "I see the Tathāgata by not seeing" (*tadā tathāgatam apaśyanayā paśyāmi*). Section §11.1 is thus a lengthy description of the body of the Tathāgata all couched in terms of negation. Following this, Śāriputra asks where Vimalakīrti passed away before being reborn in this world, only to be answered that like an illusory creation, Vimalakīrti neither passes away nor is reborn (in §11.2). The Buddha cuts in to provide a slightly less cryptic answer, namely that Vimalakīrti came from the Abhirati world of the Buddha Akṣobhya (at the start of §11.3). We can see that this material is very similar in both content and ordered sequence to that found in Chp. 2. Both deal with the identity, status and location of Vimalakīrti, and also the issue of the body of a Tathāgata.

The similarities continue with the remainder of Chp. 11, however, from the latter half of §11.3 up to §11.9. Here, the topic is that of Akṣobhya's Buddha field, which corresponds to material in the latter half of Chp. 1 (at §1.11-20). In §11.3, Śāriputra queries why Vimalakīrti would wish to come to the ever so faulty Sāhā world from wondrous Abhirati. Vimalakīrti replies

that the fault is not with the Sāhā world, but whosoever perceives it as such. He then brings the glorious Abhirati world itself into the Sāhā world, through his supernatural power, though the latter is in no way enlarged or effected thereby (§11.4-6). The audience sees Abhirati, which is returned to its former location (§11.7). The chapter ends with Śāriputra wishing all beings may be reborn in such a world, and attain such power as Vimalakīrti (§11.8), before a general outline of the benefits of upholding this Dharma teaching (§11.9).

This ends the main bulk of the *Nirdeśa*. The subsequent Chp. 12 is a fairly typical Mahāyāna *sūtra Avadāna*, quite possibly a "latch" as mentioned previously, and therefore both part of the text as a whole, but also seeming to be able to stand-alone as a short piece of literature in its own right. This is just as the material at the very beginning of Chp. 1 is also largely a stock sūtra *nidāna*, which outlines the scene and circumstances of the teaching, though is not necessarily intrinsic to the specific narrative of the actual text in question.

2.3 Proposed Chiastic Structure

From the above, we can already get a strong impression of the parallel nature of these portions at the start and end of the text respectively. Such potentially chiastic structures are easily sketched out in a number of schematic forms, which allows the reader to quickly see the mirrored dual forms that they take. It is worth mentioning some sound advice from Douglas against the tendency—conscious or otherwise—to force a perfect chiastic structure onto a text, "A smoothly perfect design would be suspect; a few mismatches in an ancient text that has survived so many generations

would be much more convincing to discriminating readers."[44] Below we show the two portions of the text in the left column (§1.11 to §2.12) and right column (§11.1 to §11.9) respectively.

▪Figure 2 Proposed Chiastic Structure (Chp. §1-2 vs Chp. §11)

§1.11-§1.20 Śākyamuni's Buddha Field ⇩	⇧ §11.3-§11.9 Akṣobhya's Buddha Field
§1.11 Ratnākara's question: Explain to these bodhisattvas the purification of the Buddha field §1.12 Buddha's explanation of purification of the Buddha field	
§1.15 Śāriputra and the impurity of the Sahāloka §1.15 Blind man not see sun & moon §1.17 Buddha reveals his field, like world of Ratnavyūha §1.18 Śāriputra sees it, "to the extent of the their purity" §1.19 84,000 beings arouse aspiration to awakening §1.20 Return to Sahāloka More realizations	§11.3 Sunlight negates darkness §11.4-5 Vimalakīrti uses psychic powers to reveal Abhirati §11.7 Everyone sees Abhirati §11.8 Śāriputra sees Abhirati §11.7+ myriad beings arouse aspiration to awakening
§2.1-§2.2 Layman Vimalakīrti ⇩	⇧ §11.2-§11.3 Alien Vimalakīrti
§2.1 Portrait of Vimalakīrti Layman lives in Vaiśalī §2.2-6 … description of activities … §2.6 Vimalakīrti endowed with skillful means §2.7 Uses skillful means to manifest illness	§11.2 Śāriputra asks where Vimalakīrti has died to be reborn here … §11.2 Like an illusion, neither comes nor goes §11.3 Buddha states that Vimalakīrti is from Abhirati

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[44] DOUGLAS, *Thinking in Circles*, 122.

§2.7-§2.13 Tathāgata Body ⇩	⇧ §11.1-§11.9 Tathāgata Body
§2.7 Simulated illness of Vimalakīrti §2.8-11 Vimalakīrti's homily on the human body §2.12 Vimalakīrti's homily on the body of the Tathāgata §2.13 Audience has realizations	§11.1a How Vimalakīrti sees the Tathāgata §11.1b-u How Vimalakīrti sees the Tathāgata §11.1w How Vimalakīrti sees the Tathāgata

While the two sides of this structure clearly parallel one another, there are of course some differences. Our headings for each of the sub-sections are an attempt to describe the main themes therein. Once the parallelism becomes manifest, we can compare each of the two parallel passages and see the common theme that binds the two. A kind of thematic deep structure to the above chiasmus could thus be outlined as follows:

▪Figure 3 Chiastic Structure of Affirmative & Negative Statements

Affirmative Statements	Negative Statements
A: The Buddha field: A1: Seeing purity or impurity; A2: Metaphor of light vs darkness; A3: Revelation of the Buddha field; A4: Spiritual realizations & aspiration; A5: Return to the present world.	A': The Buddha field: A'1: Seeing purity or impurity; A'2: Metaphor of light vs darkness; A'3: Revelation of the Buddha field; A'4: Spiritual realizations & aspiration; A'5: Return to the present world.
B: Vimalakīrti: B1: His spatial location; B2: His identity & status.	B': Vimalakīrti: B'1: His spatial location; B'2: His identity & status.
C: (Seeing) the body of the Tathāgata	C': Seeing (the body of) the Tathāgata

While in this schematic we have used the same generic thematic headings for both sides, the left and right column headings themselves have been appended with "affirmative" and "negative" statements, respectively. One of the forms that chiasmus can take is that the two halves are not only split and reversed in order, but that the content of the two sides is somehow mirrored or reflected as well. The type of reflection that may occur depends largely on the central crux of the whole, which we have not shown here. That reflection can be one of simple opposites, but could also be complementary in nature. In terms of religious philosophy, the dualisms that form will of course be largely dependent on the structure of the philosophical system as a whole. There is thus no fixed rule. Some other paralleled ideas, while not presented as complementary opposites, also feature dualisms. For example, the use of the sun and moon or light and darkness to represent knowledge and ignorance. In our case, we can illustrate a few significant examples from the schematic above, where the material is not simply repeated on the other side in reverse order, but has transformed in a more fundamental way.

At A-A', "The Buddha Field", while the basic theme is the same, two radically different Buddha fields are being referred to. The first is that of Śākyamuni, this world, which is spatially coextensive with the Sāhā world (A). The second is Abhirati, the field of Akṣobhya, the other world, which is brought into the space of the Sāhā world without any gain or loss of either of the two (A').

For B-B', "Vimalakīrti", we have two very different definitions and explanations of our main hero for the text. The first is a layman bodhisattva who lives in Vaiśalī (B); the second is a bodhisattva from another universe, a bodhisattvic alien if you will (B'). Note that Vaiśalī is also located in the Sāhā

world *qua* Śākyamuni's Buddha field, whereas the other universe in question is the field of Akṣobhya, Abhirati. So, there is also a direct connection between sections A-A' and B-B'.

Finally, C-C', "The Body of the Tathāgata", again has a consistent theme, but has radical differences. The first description is contra Vimalakīrti's disparagement of the sick and imperfect regular human body, all given in positive terms of the various qualities that either the Buddha possesses or that one cultivates in order to attain such a Tathāgata body, i.e. what it "*is*" (C). In the latter description, however, it is entirely in negative language, i.e. what the Tathāgata "*is not*" (C').

At this point, we have perhaps gone as far as is possible by merely looking at the structural elements of the text, its inverted parallel chiasmus. In order to proceed further, we must now turn to the form of discourse that each of the paralleled passages utilizes, that we have already hinted at here. That is, the apophatic rhetoric which is a hallmark of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*.

3. Apophatic Rhetoric in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

Where Lissner utilizes the notion of "naysaying" in chiastic structures,[45] Sells describes apophasis (Greek: ἀπορία) as "unsaying":[46]

> *Apophasis* is the common Greek designation for this language. … *apo phasis* (un-saying or speaking-away). … Every act of un-saying demands or presupposes a previous saying. … It is in the tension between the two propositions that the discourse becomes meaningful.

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[45] Lissner, *Chi-Thinking: Chiasmus and Cognition*, 394.
[46] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 2-3.

Strictly speaking, the term "apophasis" itself could apply to individual statements as well as an overall form of discourse in which such individual statements occur. The same can be said for apophasis' opposite, "kataphasis", literally "saying with", and used in the sense of affirmation. In order to avoid ambiguity here, we shall use the terms "apophasis" and "kataphasis" to refer to particular broad forms of discourse and their rhetorical modes, and "affirmation" and "negation" to describe individual statements or claims that make up such a discourse. For example, an apophatic treatise may make use of both affirmative and negative individual statements. SELLS makes several distinctions within the broad sphere of apophasis as a mode of religious discourse. His concern is not with apophatic methodology, historical cases which are related to such discourses, or weaker examples which may make some brief claim to the ineffability of a given paradox. Rather, he reserves "the term *apophasis* for those writings in which unnameability is not only asserted but performed", where the very form of discourse becomes "a force that transforms normal logical and semantic structures".[47] Such intense apophatic discourse is relentless, and strictly speaking cannot come to any satisfactory conclusion. This is because while it starts from something to the effect of "Such-and-such is ineffable", there is an inherent contradiction in such a statement which names a "such-and-such" only to state that it is ineffable. The discourse then proceeds to "It is ineffable", but even here the pronoun "it" is a mere substitute for a named and effable thing. Any subsequent negation of such a term, for example "It is neither this nor that", still functions to affirm in the sense that the negations are still predicated on the subject "it" which "is" (or "does"). Even a negation must negate some *thing*, which is implied in its rejection or denial. One could add that the notions of "incon-

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[47] SELLS, *Mystical Languages*, 3.

ceivability" or "unthinkability" function in like manner to "ineffability" and "unnameability" as expressions and names arise from concepts and thought.

Thus for Sᴇʟʟꜱ, the modern discourse of experience itself (perhaps influenced by phenomenology) must presuppose an object of experience and a subject which experiences it, and the construction betwixt and between the two. All of these are reflected in the very nature of language and grammar itself.[48] Apophasis cannot thus simply be glossed "an experience". However, through this process, apophatic discourse which first affirms, then negates, only to negate its own negation, leads to what Sᴇʟʟꜱ calls a "meaning event". That is, apophatic rhetoric points "beyond structures of self and other, subject and object", making it the linguistic or textual equivalent of mystical union itself.[49] It is important to note that this is not the same as a description of a state of union (which would be a description of experience), nor is it language which *refers* to such a state (which would involve the duality of subjects and objects). "Meaning event indicates that moment when the meaning has become identical or fused with the act of predication", it "effects a semantic union that re-creates or imitates the mystical union."[50] Conventional language as signs refers to semantic or meaning content, but a juxtaposing of antithetical semantic content, that is, an affirmative and a corresponding negative statement, overcomes or transcends such content. Likewise, mystical union transcends all forms of existential (and non-existential) positions. Thus, true apophatic discourse is performative in nature.[51] One does not *understand*

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[48] Sᴇʟʟꜱ, *Mystical Languages*, 10.

[49] Sᴇʟʟꜱ, *Mystical Languages*, 10.

[50] Sᴇʟʟꜱ, *Mystical Languages*, 9.

[51] We feel that a similar idea is conveyed by Sɪʟᴋ, when he states that "Vimalakīrti is an effective spokesman for the principle of non-duality precisely because he himself *embodies* the idea of the paradoxical reality of impossibility" (emphasis in original);

it, though even to say that one *becomes it* would be correct only in kataphatic terms, and should itself also be negated *ad infinitum*. Hence, it is like the telling of a joke, or a work of art—try to explain *it* or pinpoint exactly where the humor or aesthetic beauty lies, and it is lost. Of course, such an act of searching for the moment of humor, just as the act of searching for the object of truth—that true *thing* —is doomed in the first place. For, when the goal of apophatic discourse is a *non*-object and a *no*-thing, what is there to be found?

The results of such a discourse can be very radical indeed, because the transcendence by negation and denial of affirmed traditional norms makes the meaning event anarchic in nature, i.e. without any ultimate underlying ground or principle (*an-archê*).[52] The often hilarious iconoclastic and irreverent scenes of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* are sound testament to this. Not only are opposing philosophical categories such as *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, and social roles such as monk versus layman, thrown into disarray, even time and space seem to warp and bend from Vimalakīrti's bedroom to other universes. The aim of such warping and bending of the very fabric of our world is, we dare say, to break down our very ideas that we know anything at all. The loss of such ideas leads to un-knowing, which transcends the dilemma of knowing and ignorance. For example, Sells describes the "*agnosia*" at the core of Dionysius the Areopagite's "mystical theology", as "an unknowing which goes beyond rather than falling short of kataphatic affirmations".[53] Though by so asserting such "un-knowing", we may have already slipped back to a kataphatic mode of expression.

We shall now examine the three themes which resulted from our

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in Silk, "Taking the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Seriously", 176.

[52] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 209.

[53] Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 35.

structural analysis of the text previously, in terms of their affirmative and negative statements, which are built upon to perform apophatic discourse. These three themes are "Where is the Buddha Field?" (§3.1), "Who is Vimalakīrti?" (§3.2) and "What is a Tathāgata Body?" (§3.3).

3.1 Where is the Buddha Field?

As we have already seen, the relative structures of the two discourses on Śākyamuni's and Akṣobhya's Buddha fields are clearly juxtaposed at the start in Chp. §1.11-20 and end in Chp. §11.3-9 of the text. However, the description of the former includes specific content (§1.11-14) that does not appear to have correspondence in the latter. This content is very much in the mode of affirmation, as it affirms a number of more or less systematic lists of various *dharma*s on the Bodhisattva path. For example,

> The field of good intentions is the Buddha field of the bodhisattva; the field of high resolve …; the field of effort …; the arising of aspiration [to awakening] …[54]

> The field of giving is the Buddha field of the bodhisattva; the field of moral discipline …; the field of tolerance …; the field of vigor …; the field of concentration …; the field of knowledge …[55]

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[54] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 5, b5-6, b7: "*āśayakṣetraṃ bodhisatvasya buddhakṣetram …| adhyāśayakṣetraṃ …| prayogakṣetraṃ …| bodhicittotpādo buddhakṣetram …|*"; cf. Zhī Qiān, *Weímójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 520, a16-b16; Kumārajīva, *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 538, a29-b26; Xuánzàng, *Shuō Wúgoùchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 559, a29-c10; Chos ñid tshul khrims, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 179, a2-b180; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 16.

[55] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 5, b5-6, b7: "*dānakṣetraṃ bodhisatvasya buddhakṣetram| śīlakṣetraṃ …| kṣāntikṣetraṃ …| vīryakṣetraṃ …| dhyānakṣetraṃ*

So this section continues, utilizing the four immeasurables, the four means to conversion, the 37 factors of awakening, and so forth. While §1.12-13 is fairly long, part of it is recapitulated near the end at §1.14, drawing to the famous conclusion:

> Therefore, gentlemen, the bodhisattva who wishes to purify the Buddha field should purify their own mind. For what reason? To the extent that the bodhisattva's mind is purified, just so is there purification of the Buddha field.[56]

This equation of the purity of the field with mental purity then becomes the basis for the response to Śāriputra's perplexity—his fundamental *aporia*— about the rather dissatisfactory state of Śākyamuni's Sāhā world. That is to say, Śāriputra is told that he sees the faults of the Sāhā world not because it is in fact blighted with "rises and falls" (*utkūlanikūlāṃ*), but because Śāriputra's own "mind is uneven" (*asamacitta*). The Buddha reveals to Śāriputra and the rest of the audience the Sāhā world in all its glorious splendor, and returns it once again to the world which they usually perceive. Despite the difference of the perceived world(s) on the part of Śāriputra and others—many of whom attain various spiritual realizations as a result of this vision—there is no substantial difference between them at all. There are no two worlds, but just

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...| *prajñākṣetraṃ* ...|"; cf. LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 17f.

[56] STUDY GROUP, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 6, b7-7, a5: "*tasmāt tarhi kulaputra buddha-kṣetraṃ pariśodhayitukāmena bodhisatvena svacittapariśodhane yatnaḥ karaṇīyaḥ| tat kasya hetoḥ| yādṛśī bodhisatvasya cittapariśuddhis tādṛśī buddhakṣetra-pariśuddhiḥ saṃbhavati|*"; cf. ZHĪ Qiān, *Weímójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 520, b16-24; KUMĀRAJĪVA, *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 538, b26-c6; XUÁNZÀNG, *Shuō Wúgòuchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 559, c11-26; CHOS ÑID TSHUL KHRIMS, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 180, a2-7; cf. LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 21f.

one world. We could call this a kind of spatialized non-duality.

While all this is described in affirmative terms—it *is* all about what is—there is still a dualistic element to this material from the start of the text at §1.11-20. There is first of all a juxtaposition between the physical world and the mental world. In doing so, the very term "field" (*kṣetra*) shifts from a very concrete external and physical thing, to a metaphor for the mental state and attitude of the bodhisattva. (Due to this latter usage of "field" being such a common metaphor in Buddhist thought, it is easy to overlook the important fact that it is still indeed a cognitive metaphor.) These external and internal senses can also be seen as objective and subjective syntactic elements, which leads to a second juxtaposition between the pure mind and the impure mind. That is, the same object—in this case a "world"—appears subjectively as different objects to different subjective minds. Another metaphor is given to describe this, namely that it is not the fault of the sun or moon that those born blind (*jātyandha*) cannot see them. This is also an example of affirmative expression which uses complementary dualistic opposites to make its point.

Moving on to the end of the text, in §11.3 a strikingly similar metaphor is given of the rays of the solar disc which pierce the darkness, just as the bodhisattva comes to pierce the "darkness of the afflictions" (*kleśāndha-kāraṃ*). This dualistic metaphor is also Vimalakīrti's response to Śāriputra's amazement—his *aporia*—that Vimalakīrti, "having left a Buddha field as pure as [Abhirati], would delight in a Buddha field with as many flaws as [the Sāhā world]".[57] Thus this section on Buddha fields at the end of the text

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[57] STUDY GROUP, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 68, a3-b1: "*āścaryaṃ bhagavan yad eṣa sat-puruṣas tāvatpariśuddhād buddhakṣetrād āgatyehaivaṃ bahudoṣaduṣṭe buddhakṣetre 'bhiramate|*"; cf. ZHĪ Qiān, *Weímójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 534, c20-29; KUMĀRAJĪVA, *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 555, b5-14; XŪÁNZÀNG, *Shuō Wúgòuchēng*

also starts with material which parallels the start of the text, it is thus also marked with a juxtaposed contrast between the two worlds with subjective evaluation.

The description of Abhirati that follows is also still largely affirmative in character (in §11.4). Much of the narrative focuses on Vimalakīrti's feats of psychic power, both as he brings Abhirati into the same space as the Sāhā, and as he returns it back again (§11.4-6) (another parallel with §1). However, in another form of apophasis which differs from mere negation, the text critically states that in this process:

> But the other gods and humans, they neither knew nor saw: "Where are we being carried away to?" For when this world system Abhirati was conveyed to the world system Sāhā, it was neither diminished nor enlarged at all; and this world system was neither augmented nor expanded; nor was the world system Abhirati made any smaller. Just as everything appeared before, so it appeared afterwards.[58]

Jīng, T14, no. 476, p. 584, c17-27; Chos ñid tshul khrims, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 232, b5-233, a2; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 244f.

[58] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 69, a7-b4: "*tān bhagavān vinayanārtham evam āha: na mamātra vṛṣabhitā, vimalakīrtinā bodhisatvena kriyamāṇānām (→hriya-māṇānām)| tatra ye punar anye devamanuṣyāḥ, te na jānanti na paśyanti 'kuto vayaṃ kriyāmaha (→hriyāmaha)' iti| na hy abhiratyā lokadhātor imaṃ sahaṃ lokadhātuṃ praveśitāyā (→-ayā?) ūnatvaṃ na pūrṇatvam abhūt| na cāsya loka-dhātor utpīḍo na saṃbādhaḥ| nāpy abhiratyā lokadhātor ūnabhāvaḥ| yathā pūrvaṃ tathā paścāt saṃdṛśyate|*", we have made some emendments to the Sanskrit text of Study Group (2006); cf. Zhī Qiān, *Weímójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 535, a16-17; Kumārajīva, *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 555, c1-7; Xuánzàng, *Shuō Wúgoùchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 585, a23-b4; Chos ñid tshul khrims, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 233, b5-234; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 248.

Again, just as Śāriputra's vision of the Sāhā world as "impure" and "pure" before and after Śākyamuni's intervention, respectively, here there is no difference between the Sāhā world and Abhirati. We can say that when the audience saw the other world, in effect they saw nothing other than the world they saw before. Does this mean that they thus saw *no thing* at all as Abhirati?

In SELLS' concluding section on "Principles of Apophatic Language", he proposes a formal outline of apophasis based on his sample texts.[59] There are seven key principles in total, the last of which is the "meaning event" described above, which is composed of some or all of the first six principles. The third of these is particularly relevant to the theme of Buddha fields, namely "The Dialectic of Transcendence and Immanence", which includes:[60]

> a) The effort to express and affirm transcendence leads to an affirmation of radical immanence. That which is beyond is within. That which is other, is the non-other.

This certainly appears to be the case here. At first we may take the impure Sāhā world as "this world"—the mundane, and Abhirati as the "other world"—the transcendent, the transmundane. But after their equation through the juxtaposition of these passages, both at §1.11-20 and at §11.3-9, we are still left wondering: Where is the Buddha field of Śākyamuni? And of Akṣobhya? Are they even two different worlds at all?

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59 SELLS, *Mystical Languages*, 206ff.
60 SELLS, *Mystical Languages*, 207f.

3.2 Who is Vimalakīrti?

The question of the identity or difference of the Sāhā and Abhirati worlds is also pertinent to the second example for examination, namely, the status or identity of our hero protagonist Vimalakīrti himself. Who is he? And where is he from? As we mentioned previously, much classical and modern interpretation of the text typically gives great weight to passages in Chp. §2.1-7 which focus on his status as a layman. SILK has recently challenged this common understanding, and asks the "bizarre question: Is Vimalakīrti really a layman?"[61] Here, by comparing that same material with the inverted parallel descripttions (or non-descriptions) in Chp. §11.2-3 at the end of the text, we hope to propose another, quite radically different, possibility to this challenge.

The description of Vimalakīrti in §2.1-7 is fairly standard affirmation, stating that he is so-and-so, or such-and-such. The first lines have, for example:

> At that time, the Licchavi named Vimalakīrti dwelt in the great city of Vaiśalī.[62]

Following a description that could almost apply to any great bodhisattva in

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[61] SILK, "Taking the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* Seriously" (2014): 173. Discussion of other scholars' views on this matter follow on pages 174-175.

[62] STUDY GROUP, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 8, b4: "*§2.1 tena khalu punaḥ samayena vaiśālyāṃ mahānagaryāṃ vimala-kīrtir nāma licchaviḥ prativasati sma|*"; cf. ZHĪ Qiān, *Weímójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 520, c23; KUMĀRAJĪVA, *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 539, a7; XÚÁNZÀNG, *Shuō Wúgoùchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 560, b5; CHOS ÑID TSHUL KHRIMS, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 184, a3; cf. LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 28.

any Mahāyāna *sūtra*, the reasons for his presence there are given as:

> He dwelt in the great city of Vaiśalī through skillful means to mature beings.[63]

This notion of his *dwelling* there *through skillful means* needs to be kept in mind when we reach the material in Chp. §11. But first, let us continue with the passages at the start of the *Nirdeśa*. Section §2.2 is structured around the six perfections and the negative traits they are antidotes for; and §2.3 contains the famous material detailing his lay status. Again, some examples are in order:

> Wearing the white clothing [of a layman], he was endowed with the decorum of a renunciant. Dwelling in a house, he was not associated with the realms of desire, form or the formless. Appearing with wife and sons, he always practiced the [celibate] spiritual life. Having family and retinue, he always lived in solitude. …[64]

This section continues for some length, and similarly for §2.4. The structure of these is repetitive, and takes the form of "Although he was [X], but he still did [Y]". The juxtaposition of X and Y makes the repetition far from

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[63] STUDY GROUP, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 8, b4: "… *sa satvaparipākāyopāyakauśalyena vaiśālyāṃ mahānagaryāṃ prativasati sma|*"; cf. LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 29.

[64] STUDY GROUP, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 9, a3-7: "*avadātavastradhārī śramaṇeryāpatha-saṃpannaḥ| gṛhavāsasthitaḥ kāmadhāturūpadhātvārūpyadhātvasaṃsṛṣṭaḥ| bhāryā-putradārāṃś ca saṃdarśayati, sadā ca brahmacārī| parivāraparivṛtaś ca bhavati, sadā ca vivekacārī| …*", etc.; cf. ZHĪ Qiān, *Weímójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 521, a5-10; KUMĀRAJĪVA, *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 539, a19-25; XÚĀNZÀNG, *Shuō Wúgoùchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 560, b20-28; CHOS ÑID TSHUL KHRIMS, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 182, a2-6; cf. LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 29.

boring, because the various deeds Y are of course the very opposite of what one would expect of an X. Of these, the *locus classicus* is perhaps his being a celibate man with wife and children. While the status or position and the given action thus run counter to our usual assumptions, these expressions are still affirmations, they are still about Vimalakīrti who *is* so-and-so, and who *does* such-and-such.

Prima facie, it is obvious why this has then led to the commonly accepted interpretation of Vimalakīrti as a layman. However, now we have the Sanskrit manuscript we do believe that more attention should be paid to the fact that many of these statements include the term "*saṃdṛśyate*" (or "*saṃdarśayati*"), i.e. "appear", "show" or "manifest" (Chn: 示 shì; 現 xiàn). In a similar sense, we have the term "*lokānuvartanāya*", i.e. "in accordance with the world", in §2.4, a notion well developed in the Lokottaravāda schools as a description of how the Buddha merely "appears" to do various things, but not in reality.[65] Together, we think that these notions are strongly connected to the point raised above about skillful means, and together we should read that *through skillful means* he *appeared* to live in Vaiśalī and perform his various deeds.

Appearances, of course, are not actual facts, a very important point as we now move into the material in Chp. §11.2-3, when Śāriputra seeks to delve a little deeper into the background of his sparring partner. After first asking the Buddha himself, Śāriputra is directed to ask Vimalakīrti, and the dialogue is as follows (§11.2):

> … Then, the Venerable Śāriputra said this to Vimalakīrti, the

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[65] HARRISON, "The Earliest Chinese Translations of Mahayana Buddhist Sūtras: Some Notes on the Works of Lokakṣema." *Buddhist Studies Review* 10 (1993).

Licchavi: Good man! Having passed away from where, have you arisen here?

Vimalakīrti said: Is there any passing away or arising of those phenomena directly realized by the Elder?

[Śāriputra] said: There is not any passing away or arising of those phenomena.

[Vimalakīrti] said: Since all phenomena neither pass away nor arise, how does it even occur to you: "Having passed away from where, did you arise here?"?[66]

Once again a metaphor is employed by Vimalakīrti to answer. The metaphor is that of "an illusorily created man or woman" (*nirmitāṃ striyaṃ puruṣaṃ vā*), who while appearing to do so, in truth neither arises nor passes away (*cyutvehopapanna*). It continues:

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[66] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 67, b2-68, a3: "*athāyuṣmāñ śāriputro bhagavantam etad avocat: katamasmād bhagavan buddhakṣetrāc cyutau (→ cyuto, cyutva?) vimalakīrtiḥ kulaputra idaṃ buddhakṣetram āgataḥ?| bhagavān āha: etam eva tvaṃ śāriputra satpuruṣaṃ paripṛcchah kutas tvaṃ cyutvehopapanna iti| athāyuṣmāñ śāriputro vimalakīrtiṃ licchavim etad avocat: kutas tvaṃ kulaputra cyutvehopapannaḥ| vimalakīrtir āha: yaḥ sthavireṇa dharmaḥ sākṣātkṛtaḥ, kaccit tasya dharmasya cyutir upapattir vā| āha: na tasya dharmasya kācic cyutir upapattir vā| āha: evam acyutikānām anutpattikānāṃ bhadanta śāriputra sarvadharmāṇāṃ, kutas tavaivaṃ bhavati, "kutas tvaṃ cyutvehopapanna" iti| ... āha: nanu bhadanta śāriputra nirmitasvabhāvāḥ sarvadharmās tathāgatena nirdiṣṭāḥ| āha: evam etat kulaputra|*", emendments our own; cf. Zhī Qiān, *Wéimójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 534, c9-20; Kumārajīva, *Wéimójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 555, a25-b5; Xuánzàng, *Shuō Wúgoùchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 584, c1-16; Chos ñid tshul khrims, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 232, a6-b5; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 242f.

> [Vimalakīrti] said: Venerable Śāriputra! Since all phenomena are of the nature of illusory creations[, how does it even occur to you]: "Having passed away from where, did you arise here?"?[67]

The question of "arising and passing away", basically synonymous with being born and dying, is one of identity and ontological status. It is related to the question of location, akin to the previous issue of "fields" as worlds, and also concerns the spatial. The latter question is dependent on the former, however, so when Vimalakīrti's arising and passing away is effectively denied, so too is his spatial location, i.e. where he has come from, and where he is now. The text has thus at this point moved to an apophatic mode of discourse, and that is specifically with respect to the earlier affirmations found previously in Chp. §2, which contains many examples of who Vimalakīrti *is*, and what he *does*. This negating material here is much shorter than that at the start of the text, and it goes directly to the root of the matter, the very existential status of the protagonist, upon which the rest of predicated.

Despite this, it is very noteworthy that the end of §11.2 and section §11.3 shifts back to an affirmative mode. The former has:

> Venerable Śāriputra! "Passing away" is a term designating the breakdown of constructions; "arising" is [a term designating] the continuation of constructions. With respect to that, when the bodhisattva passes away, the constructions which are wholesome roots do not break down; and [when the bodhisattva] arises, the

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[67] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 67, b2-68, a3: "*āha: nirmitasvabhāveṣu bhadanta śāriputra sarvadharmeṣu, (kutas tvam tavaivam bhavati) "kutas tvaṃ cyutvehopapanna" iti|*".

unwholesome does not continue.[68]

This is an excellent example of what Sᴇʟʟs considers to be the second possible response to *aporia*, i.e. to make a distinction between the ways in which the subject is still potentially describable and those in which it is not.[69] It refuses to acknowledge the position of the text as really a paradox, and attempts to work out a satisfactory rationalized hermeneutic solution.

Finally, just as §11.2 began with Śāriputra first questioning the Buddha on the matter, here the Buddha gives a straight answer—that is, an affirmative answer—to the question at hand. It is almost as though the Blessed One cannot bear to see poor Śāriputra left hung out to dry. Section §11.3 states:

> Thereupon, the Blessed One addressed the Venerable Śāriputra: Śāriputra! This Good Man [Vimalakīrti] has come from the presence of the Tathāgata Akṣobhya, from the world system Abhirati.[70]

We have already covered the remainder of this section, in the discussion on Buddha fields. This is on one hand an even clearer return to what may be

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[68] Sᴛᴜᴅʏ Gʀᴏᴜᴘ, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 67, b2-68, a3: ""*cyutir*" *iti bhadantaśāriputra abhisaṃskārakṣana(→ °kṣapaṇa?, °kṣaya?)lakṣaṇapadam etat| "upapattir" ity abhisaṃskāraprabandha eṣaḥ| tatra bodhisatvaś cyavate, na kuśalamūlābhi-saṃskāraṃ kṣapayati| upapadyate ca, na cākuśalaṃ prabadhnāti|*", emendments our own; cf. Lᴀᴍᴏᴛᴛᴇ, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 243.

[69] Sᴇʟʟs, *Mystical Languages*, 2.

[70] Sᴛᴜᴅʏ Gʀᴏᴜᴘ, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 68, a3-b1: "*tatra bhagavān āyuṣmantaṃ śāriputram āmantrayate sma: akṣobhyasya śāriputra tathāgatasya sakāśād āgata eṣa kulaputro 'bhiratyā lokadhātoḥ|*"; cf. Zʜɪ̄ Qiān, *Wéimójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 534, c20-29; Kᴜᴍᴀ̄ʀᴀᴊɪ̄ᴠᴀ, *Wéimójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 555, b5-14; Xᴜᴀ́ɴᴢᴀ̀ɴɢ, *Shuō Wúgòuchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 584, c17-27; Cʜᴏs ñɪᴅ ᴛsʜᴜʟ ᴋʜʀɪᴍs, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 232, b5-233, a2; cf. Lᴀᴍᴏᴛᴛᴇ, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 243.

an overall kataphatic mode of discourse, asserting not only that Vimalakīrti has indeed come from some place, but in the process thus also implicitly affirming his ontological status. Though, on the other hand, given what we have already learnt about the relationship between the Sāhā and Abhirati worlds, we are still in some doubt: Does the above passage thus effectively mean that indeed Vimalakīrti is from the Sāhā world, more specifically Vaiśalī, if Chp. §2 is to be believed? Or, does it mean that he hails from the complete opposite, another world, as marvelous as this world is flawed—Abhirati?

In his translation of the *Śūraṃgamasamādhi Sūtra*, as well as the introduction to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, LAMOTTE provides some discussion on Vimalakīrti's hailing from the Abhirati world, and his final awakening in the Sāhā world.[71] However, he is reading his texts with the assumptions of inter-textual coherency and rational (kataphatic) consistency. From our apophatic reading here, we are not starting from the assumption that Vimalakīrti *must* actually come from some place and go to some place, and that his journey *must* be describable in temporal and spatial terms. We believe that would be to miss the more important point that the text is performing, rather than stating.

3.3 What is a Tathāgata Body?

Our last example is that of the *aporia* of the very status of the Buddhas themselves, or more specifically, their "Tathāgata body" (*tathāgatakāya*). This appears in Chp. §2.7-13 at the start of the text, and conversely at

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[71] LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, civ, 243 n9f; and also LAMOTTE, *Śūraṃgama-samādhisūtra, The Concentration of Heroic Progress* (Curzon, 1998), 170 n181.

Chp. §11.1 at the end. There are strong parallels between this topic in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, and the apophatic discourses in Chp. 16 and Chp. 32 of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, where the Tathāgata is equated with "suchness" (*tathatā*) and dependent origination, the middle between the two extremes.[72] We shall leave aside a detailed comparison between these two important Mahāyāna *sūtra*s here, however.

Vimalakīrti's teaching on this topic is in the narrative context of his feigned illness, manifested through his skillful means (*upāya*).[73] He thus begins with a homily on the regular human body to his audience of the king, ministers, and all the other citizens of Vaiśalī who have come to visit him. Spanning a number of paragraphs (§2.8-11), the human body is described by the protagonist in a number of more or less systematic ways, most of which are derived from early Buddhist scripture. LAMOTTE has felicitously provided a number of footnote references from which much of this is sourced, and we see that all four of the core traditional *Āgama*s / *Nikāya*s already contain such material.[74] True to these early sources, the aim of these passages is clearly to arouse disgust and revulsion toward the human body in the mind of the practitioner, that renunciation so crucial to early Buddhist praxis. Examples in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* include, but are not limited to:

> §2.8 The body consisting of the four great elements is impermanent, fragile, untrustworthy, weak; unsubstantial, perishable, fleeting,

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[72] SHÌ Huìfēng, *Chiasmus in the Early Prajñāpāramitā*, 231ff, 284ff.

[73] For a further discussion on *upāya*, and this illness in particular, see HAMLIN, "Magical *Upāya* in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra*." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 11.1 (1988): 100f.

[74] LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, n21-28.

dissatisfactory, imbued with disease and subject to change. …[75]

§2.11 The body, receptacle of the four great elements, is unreal. The body, which neither is self nor belongs to self, is empty. … The body, an accumulation of pus and excrement, is filthy. … The body is tormented by the four hundred and four diseases. …[76]

And so on and so forth, all in the form "The body *is* [such-and-such]". All of this disparaging rhetoric is intended to lead the listener to the conclusion that:

Therefore, you should generate disgust with such a form, and generate longing for the body of a Tathāgata![77]

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[75] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 10, a4-6: "§2.8 *teṣām upasaṃkrāntānāṃ vimalakīrtir licchaviḥ| imam eva cāturmahābhautikaṃ kāyam ārabhya dharmaṃ deśayati sma: evam anityo 'yaṃ mārṣāḥ kāyaḥ, evam adhruvaḥ, evam anāsvāsikaḥ, evaṃ durbalaḥ evam asāraḥ, evaṃ jarjaraḥ, evam itvaraḥ, evaṃ duḥkhaḥ, evam ābādhikaḥ, evaṃ vipariṇāmadharmā evaṃ bahurogabhājano 'yaṃ mārṣāḥ kāyaḥ| tatra paṇḍitena niśrayo na kartavyaḥ|*"; cf. Zhī Qiān, *Weímójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 521, a28-b2; Kumārajīva, *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 539, b12-15; Xuánzàng, *Shuō Wúgòuchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 560, c18-22; Chos ñid tshul khrims, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 183, a1-3; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 33.

[76] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 10, b4-11: "§2.11 *asaṃbhūto 'yaṃ kāyo mahā-bhūtānām ālayaḥ| ...śūnyo 'yaṃ kāya ātmātmīyavigataḥ| ...rikto 'yaṃ kāyo 'śucipūti-saṃcayaḥ| tuccho 'yaṃ kāya ucchādanaparimardanavikiraṇavidhvansanadharmā| ...upadruto 'yaṃ kāyaś caturuttaraiś caturbhī rogaśataiḥ|*"; cf. Zhī Qiān, *Weímójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 521, b9-15; Kumārajīva, *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 539, b22-29; Xuánzàng, *Shuō Wúgòuchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 561, a2-10; Chos ñid tshul khrims, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 183, a7-b3; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 35f.

[77] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 10, b4-11: "*tatra yuṣmābhir evaṃrūpe kāye nirvidvirāga utpādayitavyas tathāgatakāye ca spṛhotpādayitavyā|*"; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 37f.

The language up until to this point is purely affirmative in character, as it describes what the human body *is*. (Even though we may colloquially call such language "negative" in terms of its value appraisal.) It also does so in a wide variety of ways, often with colorful and graphic metaphor, e.g. "a poisonous snake" (*āśīviṣa*). Likewise, the descriptions that follow concerning the body of the Tathāgata, are also couched as affirmations. Again, several examples alone will have to suffice at this point:

> §2.12 Friends, the body of the Tathāgata is the Dharma body, born forth from generosity, born forth from moral discipline, born forth from concentration, born forth from knowledge, born forth from liberation, and born forth from the gnosis and vision of liberation.[78]
>
> …
>
> (Ibid.) Born forth from the accumulation of all wholesome *dharma*s, born forth from what is true, born forth from what is real, and born forth from heedfulness. The body of the Tathāgata, friends, which is born forth from immeasurable pure actions, should be made into an object of longing by you.[79]

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[78] STUDY GROUP, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 11, a1-6: "§2.12 *dharmakāyo hi mārṣāḥ tathāgatakāyo dānanirjātaḥ śīlanirjātaḥ samādhinirjātaḥ prajñānirjāto vimukti-nirjāto vimuktijñānadarśananirjātaḥ|*"; cf. ZHĪ Qiān, *Weímójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 521, b15-26; KUMĀRAJĪVA, *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 539, b29-c11; XÜÁNZÀNG, *Shuō Wúgoùchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 561, a11-23; CHOS ÑID TSHUL KHRIMS, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 183, b3-184, a2; cf. LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 38f.

[79] STUDY GROUP, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 11, a1-6: "*sarvakuśaladharmaparigrahanirjātaḥ satyanirjāto bhūtanirjāto 'pramādanirjātaḥ| apramāṇaśubhakarmanirjāto mārṣāḥ tathāgatakāyas tatra yuṣmābhiḥ spṛhā kartavyā|*"; cf. LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 40.

The more or less systematic descriptions are also largely derived from the early and sectarian traditions.[80] The very concrete and often pericopic language used here, i.e. the motif of the "body" (*kāya*) of the Tathāgata being "born forth" (*nirjāta*)—strictly speaking metaphors for the physical body—further enhances the sense of affirmation about what the Buddha, the Tathāgata, *is*.

Now, despite the fact that both the above passages on the regular human body and the Tathāgata's body are affirmations, there is still an opposition between the two. We could say, in Buddhist technical terms, that the former is mundane (*laukika*) whereas the latter is transmundane (*lokottara*), or use some other such dichotomic division. However, there are few examples when the exact language of the text conveys the idea that whatever the regular human body *is*, that the Tathāgata's body *is not*, i.e. direct and explicit negations of terminology just previously affirmed. By SELLS' definition, the text has not turned to a mode of negation to discuss the body of the Tathāgata. At least, not yet.

Our material on seeing the Tathāgata in §11.1 then takes this discourse to this next level, in almost exclusively negating terms. A few examples will have to suffice, though these should be convincing enough. The opening lines of this section state:

> §11.1 When I want a vision of the Tathāgata, I see the Tathāgata by not seeing. I see [the Tathāgata] as not born from the past, as not progressing into the future, and not abiding in the present time.[81] …

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80   See LAMOTTE, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, n29-n39.

81   STUDY GROUP, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 66, a7-67, b2: "*yadāhaṃ bhagavan tathāgatasya darśanakāmo bhavāmi, tadā tathāgatam apaśyanayā paśyāmi| pūrvāntato 'jātam*

(Ibid.) [The Tathāgata] is not born of causes, is not dependent on conditions.[82] …

(Ibid.) [The Tathāgata] is not apprehender, is not apprehended.[83] …

Here, rather than "being born", we see the use of terms such as "not made" (*akṛtaḥ*), "not born" (*ajātaḥ*), "not arisen" (*anutpannaḥ*), "not become" (*abhūtaḥ*, *asaṃbhūtaḥ*, *na bhaviṣyati*) and so forth. Note, too, that we have parenthetically added "[the Tathāgata]" into our translation, a critical point we shall turn to, below. Of over twenty statements in total about the Tathāgata's body, only three are in any way affirmations. Of these three, two are related to "suchness" (*tathatā*), namely identification of the Tathāgata with the "suchness" of the aggregates, rather than the aggregates themselves; and "established on / in suchness" (*tathatāpratiṣṭhita*). The term "suchness", connoting "like this" or "as it is", thus functions grammatically far more ambiguously than most concrete nouns.

This very much conforms to Sells' description of apophasis as "un-saying". These statements thus push at the level of what can be denied or negated through language, as even "X is not Y" implies that there is still X in some form or another. The next step is to progress to omitting the agent noun

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aparāntato 'saṃkrāntaṃ pratyutpanne 'dhvany asaṃsthitaṃ paśyāmi|"; cf. Zhī Qiān, *Weímójié Jīng*, T14, no. 474, p. 534, b18-c9; Kumārajīva, *Weímójié Suǒshuō Jīng*, T14, no. 475, p. 554, c28-555, a24; Xuánzàng, *Shuō Wúgòuchēng Jīng*, T14, no. 476, p. 584, a18-b29; Chos ñid tshul khrims, *Dri ma med par*, Kg ma, p. 231, a3-232, a6; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 238.

[82] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 66, a7-67, b2: "*na hetujanitaṃ na pratyay-ādhīnam*"; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 240.

[83] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 66, a7-67, b2: "*agrāhyaḥ, aparāmṛṣṭaḥ*"; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 241.

altogether, leaving "It is not [such-and-such]", just as "Tathāgata" has been omitted from the above statements, which still hints at an existent behind the pronoun or behind the verb in the sentence. The only option remaining within the use of language is to state that "it is inexpressible". This mode of expression is precisely what we find at the end of §11.1:

> (Ibid.) [The Tathāgata] is inexpressible by any language or description.[84]

Likewise, a semantic transformation takes place in the last sentences immediately after this:

> (Ibid.) The body of the Tathāgata is endowed with such qualities, he is to be seen in this way. Those who see in this way, see correctly; those who see otherwise, see wrongly.[85]

Above we noted that the object of vision, the "body of the Tathāgata", was not actually grammatically provided in many of the above statements, though we added it parenthetically in our translation. Here, the very last sentence also drops the object of the verb "see" (*paśyanti*), that is, the "body of the Tathāgata" is a *no* thing, a *non*-object. The object of *aporia* gone, the homily ends, only to continue with a parallel issue of where Vimalakīrti "died" in order to be "reborn" in the Sāhā world (which we have discussed above at §3.2). It is a case of the very apophatic discourse itself grammatically and semantically mimicking and performing the meaning event. This is in accord

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[84] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 66, a7-67, b2: "*sarvavyavahāranirdeśair avacanīyaḥ|*"; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 242.

[85] Study Group, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, p. 66, a7-67, b2: "*īdṛśo bhagavan tathāgatasya kāyaḥ| sa tathaiva draṣṭavyaḥ| ya evaṃ paśyanti, te samyak paśyanti| ye tv anyathā paśyanti, te mithyā paśyanti|*"; cf. Lamotte, *The Teaching of Vimalakirti*, 242.

with SELLS' sixth principle of apophasis, "Semantic Transformations".[86]

3.4 Proposed Discourse Structure

Having examined our three examples—Buddha fields, Vimalakīrti's identity, and the Tathāgata's body—to clarify the exact mode of their apophatic discourse, we would now like to attempt to outline their underlying deep structure. As SELLS states, such a rhetorical mode of negation can be given a "purely formal description" in terms of its way of written presentation.[87] SELLS includes its way of thinking, too, but we are somewhat more apprehensive about this, and feel that his own criticisms of those scholars who claim that apophasis is an "experience" can also apply. What we have are texts, and we shall confine ourselves to that, at least at this point. However, we agree with his reservations, that "[s]uch outlines, taken out of context, can resemble a mechanism",[88] but unlike his more or less synchronic study over multiple texts, we are confined to just one. Our claims here are thus restricted to that which we have just found in certain chapters of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*.

For the last two case examples at least—Vimalakīrti's status and the body of the Tathāgata—the first thematic discourse at the start of the text is one of juxtaposed affirmative statements, usually countering transmundane over mundane phenomena; the second discourse is negative in sense, denying both the mundane and transmundane in the first discourse. It may add elements declaring ineffability and / or inconceivability. The first case

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86 SELLS, *Mystical Languages*, 208f.
87 SELLS, *Mystical Languages*, 206.
88 SELLS, *Mystical Languages*, 206.

example of Buddha fields is weaker in its apophatic mode than these other two, but still follows a similar pattern. We can graphically illustrate the two paralleled discourses and their opposing structures of affirmation versus negation, as follows:

▪Figure 4 Proposed Discourse Structure

Affirmative Statements (Chp. §1-2)		Negative Statements (Chp. §11)
A Affirmation: Statement affirming the mundane. ⇕ A' Affirmation: Statement affirming the transmundane.	⇔	~A ~A' Negation: Statements denying both the mundane and the transmundane. ⇩
		~~ Negation of negation: Declaration of inexpressibility and / or inconceivability.

The first of the discourses on the Buddha field is Śākyamuni's Sāhā world. Here, we see the rhetoric of external objective purity and impurity of the world being understood through, or superseded by, the internal subjective purity and impurity of the mind. Both sets of juxtaposed categories, purity and impurity, external physical and internal mental, are affirmative in nature, affirming things in a realistic manner in accordance with standard pre-established Buddhist theory. The second of the Buddha field discourses is that of Akṣobhya's Abhirati world, an "other" world with respect to this Sāhā world. Through Vimalakīrti's psychic power, it is brought into the same temporal and spatial location of the Sāhā world, without any augmentation or diminution of either. This effectively makes the two worlds not two worlds

at all, but one, and two. It continues to affirm that the difference is merely subjective. In both discourses, there is the language of non-duality, though it is still affirmative. Even the paired metaphor of the sun and moon for knowledge and ignorance, take such a complementary structure.

The second example is Vimalakīrti himself. In the first discourse, his status and location are all given in straightforward affirmative terms, i.e. a layman dwelling in the city of Vaiśalī. However, a juxtaposition is again formed between his status and the actions he appears to perform, for example, a family man who is celibate. They are not necessarily logical contradictions, but at least social paradoxes. Still, both elements in the humorous tensions that are so created are affirmations, Vimalakīrti *is* so-and-so, and *does* such-and-such. The parallel discourse on Vimalakīrti is short, but its apophatic rhetoric is strikingly to the point: He has not come from anywhere, nor will he go anywhere; essentially he thus does not exist at all (nor not non-exist?). His status and spatial location, as well as his deeds, all are like illusory creations, mere appearance without reality. Ineffability is invoked (!) when we hear that even the question of his coming and going is inconceivable. We are later let off the hook, though, when we are told that he *does* exist, albeit as an alien super bodhisattva from another world. Still, it may not be so simple, as the fact that this other world—Abhirati, may or may not be other than this world—Sāhā, still suggests that perhaps he has not come from anywhere at all or gone anywhere after all.

Finally, in our third example, we see a now familiar pattern in the two discourses on the body of the Tathāgata. The former actually begins with a teaching on the corrupt nature of the regular human form, using standard analytic taxonomies and a number of disparaging metaphors. Once disgust

for it is generated, one is encouraged to arouse desire for the glorious and perfect body of the Tathāgata. This is also described through a large range of technical terminology related to the path and holy fruitions. The two bodies—the profane human and sacred Tathāgata—are thus strikingly juxtaposed against each other, though both are clearly affirmative in expression. The second Tathāgata body discourse, however, takes a purely negating turn, leading into apophasis. The Tathāgata is seen by not seeing; he is not seen as any phenomena, whether mundane or transmundane; not seen at all. He is declared to be inexpressible. Finally, even the subject of any position rejecting the possibility of a realistic (Tathāgata) is lost in the process.

4. A Chiastic & Apophatic Rereading of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*

We have now completed our three case examples of *aporia* in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (§0), having examined them first in terms of their chiastic structural positioning within the text as a whole (§2), and also in terms of their affirmative and negative statements that built ultimately into apophatic rhetorical modes of discourse (§3). For each of the three examples, we have discussed both the general methodological approaches that we have brought to bear on the text, as well as providing the specific details within the given chapters themselves. We have also attempted to give a formal outline of the deep chiastic and apophatic structures in this passages, while keeping in mind warnings against forcibly reading too much structural theory into a text. Our study and findings here by these two approaches are not meant to *replace* other means of interpretation, whether classical or modern. There is no overall *right* method per se, though specific questions require specific methods and ways of answering. By utilizing a range of different approaches we can develop both breadth and depth to our understanding of texts such as

the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, and avoid the ruts which occur when only the same theoretical approaches are taken towards any text.

In conclusion, therefore, we would like to discuss some broader issues. The first of these concerns a rereading of some key themes and messages in the text in the light of our study here (§4.1). The second is on how chiasmus and apophasis function together as complementary textual and discourse structural equivalents which show the same kind of underlying thinking (§4.2). Finally, we will attempt a hypothesis on what we may expect to find in the remainder of the text based on our discoveries here (§4.3). Hopefully this will go some way to alleviate the not insignificant problem of our not having examined the whole of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* text.

4.1 A Reinterpretation of Key Themes & Content

At the start of this essay, we mentioned some of the more prevalent interpretations of the key themes and content of the text (§1.1). In particular, the notion of Vimalakīrti's status as a layman, and the championing of such a role vis-à-vis the renunciant monastic; as well as advocating the present world as a Buddha field (or pure land). Both of these ideas are conveyed within the text, it is true. However, their appearances in Chp. §1 and Chp. §2 should not be taken in isolation, and we must consider the entirety of the text (as per the standard hermeneutic circle). This demands that whatever overall interpretation we give for these passages also allows for the negative material of Chp. §11. We must thus be careful to take a more nuanced approach to these dominant interpretations, and read the text from its own point of view in its entirety. We must also face the text's *aporia* and its paradox directly rather than deflect it into one or other of the kataphatic positions that make up

either side of the paradox. This is easier said than done. Playing the devil's advocate, one could ask for example: why we do not take the descriptions of Vimalakīrti in Chp. §11 as an other-worldly alien bodhisattva and Abhirati as the real other-worldly Buddha field as the main messages of the text? After all, there is surely plenty of other synchronic Buddhist literature to support such a position, if not the majority of it.

That is, we have two explicit narratives: Either Vimalakīrti is a layman from Vaiśali, engaged in all manner of mundane deeds, but tainted by none. Or, Vimalakīrti is from another world, only manifesting such an appearance for the sake of sentient beings through his psychic majesty. Which one is the real Vimalakīrti? The first, or the second? Both, one could say. Either, or, or both—these affirmative statements may all miss the key point. Neither, however, may be a better, though not the best, answer. So one says that Vimalakīrti is indescribable, and inconceivable. Is this why he is deliberately described in such incredible—that is, unbelievable—terms? Any such description of him is incorrect, for Vimalakīrti is nowhere to be found. So "neither layman nor alien" is also incorrect. Should we really refuse to answer the question? Or even attempt to abolish it?

Again: Is the Buddha field to be found elsewhere, in some distant galaxy, far, far away? Or, is it right here, in the present world? Or is it not external at all, but in the mind alone? Are they just both reflections of the mind, as pure or impure? But when they become co-extensive and co-temporal, is there any difference between this and any other world, whether external or mental *qua* internal? Dual, and relative, purity and impurity also thus cease to exist, for the insubstantial mind cannot construct any world in empty space. To affirm the existence of any Buddha field at all, any pure land, defeats itself. No this

or other, no internal or external. No world at all.

Finally: Is the Tathāgata's body just some other body, superior to the run of the mill "sack of dung"? A perfect body, the result of eons of merit and wisdom? Or is it merit and wisdom itself (another internalization of the physical)? The Tathāgata has become "such" (*tathā*), not this or that. In fact, has neither gone to nor come from "such". Any *thing* would be subject to the same problems as that "worthless" and "hollow" corpse-like shell. Even the relativity of the "unconditioned" versus the "conditioned" would fall into dualism. Only a *non-thing* could be beyond such a quandary. The Tathāgata's body—such, thus—is no body at all.

At this point we can almost see the hero, Vimalakīrti, spring out at us from behind the nearest tree—just as he did to the hapless *śrāvaka*s and *bodhisattva*s—as soon as we try to formulate any response at all to these questions. Because there are no right answers to these paradoxical questions, there are no correct responses to this *aporia*. Should we just admit this, rather than trying to explain it all away? Would this not be the best, if not the only, way to do justice to Vimalakīrti's *Nirdeśa*?

4.2 Chiasmus & Apophasis as Textual & Rhetorical Structures

While the methodologies behind our chiastic and apophatic approach are individually fairly well established, this is the first study to our knowledge that attempts to apply the two together and in a Buddhist context. While both theories could be used for both text-critical and hermeneutical purposes individually, it seems most natural to use chiasmus mainly for the former and apophasis for the latter. This is also the process that our essay has taken here. Overall, we feel that they work well as complementary approaches.

The philosophical commonalities between the two are manifold, and worth discussing in more depth.

The most obvious common feature is that both begin with an analysis into two parts. A chiastic structured text is split into two halves. Identification of the two halves goes a long way to outlining the rest of the structure. By the period of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* there were a number of well established standard elements that tradition expected to find in a given text for it to be accepted as authentic. For a Mahāyāna text, the opening "conditions" (*nidāna*) and closing "entrustment" (*parīndanā*) are classic examples (cf. studies of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*). Apophatic discourse also cleaves modes of expression into two main lines. The first affirms, and the second negates what has just been affirmed. Because the latter denies the former, the identification of the affirmative elements also is vital to discovering what material is strictly negative in expression, with the two then leading into apophasis. The text here utilizes two main spatial locations for the discourse, that of Āmrapālī-vana and Vimalakīrti's house in Vaiśalī; and also the Sāhā versus Abhiratī worlds.

Inversion is the second feature, the mirrored reflection of the textual structure or mode of discourse. That is to say, chiasmus and apophasis are not just in two parts, but are the deliberate opposing and complementary juxtaposing of dualistic counter elements. Nay saying, or un-saying, can take more forms than simply adding a "not" or "un-" before a verb or noun respectively. Depending upon the given philosophical system in which the discourse is taking place, any number of complementary ideas or things may be generated and countered. Given that much of the kataphatic material in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* utilizes Abhidharmic type taxonomies, and that the Abhi-

dharmic system of inclusion often utilized a strict excluded middle division, a large range of such complementary opposites would have been readily on hand and likely in mind for the authors of our Mahāyāna text. For example, conditioned (*saṃskṛta)* versus unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*) phenomena; mundane (*laukika*) against transmundane (*lokottara*); and so forth. Because Buddhist logic features the standard Indian tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*), further additions of "X and ~X" and "neither X nor ~X" are theoretically possible and easily appended for any pair. At the time of the text's appearance, conditions were very ripe for such dualistic and non-dualistic structures to be so developed. Again, the reflection of spatial locations is used, in particular the Sāhā versus Abhirati worlds, as "here" and "there".

The way in which the dualistic elements are inverted depends upon the third commonality, the central climax or turning point. In a chiastic structure such as the core of Campbell's "hero" metamyth, for example, the apotheosis of the hero transforms their original to their final status from the start to the end of their journey. By Sells' terminology, the center would be the "meaning event", as the discourse performs its own dissolution, inducing a similar transcendence in the reader (or listener). Of course, a chiasmus does not have to be apophatic—most examples probably are not—it could just as well contain a climatic point of reunion with an affirmed (kataphatic) deity or existent reality.[89] As such, our study here of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is a special and valuable case. Rather than being centered on a form of reunion or apotheosis, we find an absence, a silent (w)hole in the middle of the ring.

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[89] See most of the Middle Eastern religious and mythic examples in Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity*; and also Biblical examples in Douglas, *Thinking in Circles*.

4.3 The Silent (W)hole in the Middle

It must be admitted that this study is quite incomplete due to not including the *entirety* of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* text. Space has been a major limiting factor. While we feel that many may agree with our chiastic arrangement of the sections of the text that we have examined, much remains unexamined. As such, we cannot at this point claim in good faith that the whole text is so structured. A similar apology should be made for the apophatic discourse of the text. Particularly the fact that the material at the start of the text is often affirmative and seemingly kataphatic in nature, and negation then leading to the underlying apophasis only occurs once the chiastic reflected parallels are read against it. The material that we have not covered could conceivably resolve the overall effect into a kataphatic mode and leave this as the final word on the matter. At least it could in theory. Though, we doubt that it would.

One of the long ongoing criticisms of the humanities, and the challenge of modern hermeneutics in particular, is a lack of so-called "scientific method". At least in the sense of POPPER's definition, which stipulates that any truly scientific theory must be articulated in a manner which is testable for falsifiability. While we do not wish to make a claim to being truly scientific in this sense, we would still like to end our study here by proposing a hypothesis for what we would expect to find in the remainder of the text, given what we know of the basic theories of chiasmus and apophasis. This will be a potentially falsifiable hypothesis at that—if the remainder of the text is examined and found to not conform to our claim, it is demonstrated as false. The material we have covered is largely at the start and end of the text, only preceded by the fairly standard "conditions" (*nidāna*) and followed

by the "entrustment" (*parīndanā*) and "past life conditions" (*avadāna*) at the end, both of which are outside our scope here. This means that the remainder of the text is largely the center of the text.

By chiasmus methodology, we should expect to find further paralleled and paired literary elements A-A', B-B', C-C', etc., which continue toward the center X, in the form A-B-C-D-E…X…E'-D'-C'-B'-A'. We may also expect, though not demand, to find a "latch" at the end, which we could label as section A". Given our own earlier study of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, we would suggest examining the text's *Avadāna* for any functioning as a "latch" element, which may function as a micro chiasmic ring itself.[90] What the central climax point X should hold, however, is not just the middle structurally speaking, but should also be the climax of the apophasis as well. We have already seen how the paralleled elements A-A', etc., take the form of dualistic affirmation versus negation, and then move into apophasis. But the center is the only non-paired, non-paralleled element in a chiastic structure. We would thus expect to find not simply a denial or negation of the form "X is not such-and-such", where "such-and-such" is the affirmation in the preceding paralleled element. Rather, we would first of all expect to find statements such as "X is inexpressible" or "X is inconceivable". For the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, we cannot help but think of Chp. §5, "Showing the Inconceivable Liberation" (*Acintyavimokṣasaṃdarśana*), and Chp. §8, "Entry into the Dharma Gate of Non-duality" (*Advayadharmamukhapraveśa*). But these would not be the *exact* center strictly speaking, and may in turn just be frames. So we would make a further claim and expect the possibility some other even more radical *performance* of so-called inexpressibility and inconceivability, the text's ultimate apophatic meaning event.

90   SHĪ Huìfēng, *Chiasmus in the Early Prajñāpāramitā*, 264ff.

In fact, there are some fairly obvious inverted parallels between Chp. §3 "The Refusal to Enquire by the Śrāvakas and Bodhisattvas" (reaching into the start of Chp. §4 "Consolations to the Sick Man") and Chp. §8 "Introduction to the Doctrine of Non-Duality". In the former, all the śrāvaka disciples and bodhisattvas in turn recollect their trying encounters with Vimalakīrti in justification of why they are reluctant to enquire on his illness as instructed by the Buddha (Chp. §3). Only Mañjuśrī finally accepts the instruction, prefaced by describing Vimalakīrti as one who is "skillful in inverted statements" (*vyastasamastavacananirhārakuśalaḥ*), and foreboding their impending debate on the Dharma (Chp. §4.1). The debate itself takes place in Chp. §8, where Vimalakīrti invites all the bodhisattvas (though notably not the śrāvakas) to expound their understanding of "entrance into the Dharma entrance of non-duality" (*advayadharmamukhapraveśaḥ*) (in Chp. §8.1). Again, it is Mañjuśrī who is unsurprisingly the final discussant, and he states that true non-duality would be the "ineffability" (*anabhilapanam*), etc., of all *dharma*s (in Chp. §8.32), to which Vimalakīrti "was silent" (*tūṣṇīm abhūt*) (in Chp. §8.33). So ends the debate—silently. Comparing Chp. §4 and Chp. §8, the parallels of having all the bodhisattvas (at least) first speak, with Mañjuśrī as the last one who accepts the challenge and sets the affirmed expression of ineffability, are fairly clear. The fact that the former chapters explicitly state the upcoming debate, and that the discourse on non-duality is the final such dialogue in the text, also provide a prologue and conclusion structure to frame the content. Moreover, not only is this chiastic in structure, but again features affirmation versus negation, ultimately employing other features such as claims of ineffability that are often typical of apophatic discourse.

Therefore, this visit to the sick man and the ensuing debate could conceivably be yet just another layer of the chiastic onion, drawing us nearer

to the center still. What would we expect to find there? Where kataphatic chiasmus would most likely reveal and affirm a perfect unity at its center, a complete whole, a state of oneness or true existence, we suspect that apophatic chiasmus would instead show a perfect nullity, a void—to show nothing at all, not even show. In the Buddhist context, particularly the Mahāyāna, we may naturally think of "zero"—*śūnyatā*. Note, however, that our hypothesis would indicate a performance of zero or emptiness, a meaning event, rather than a mere philosophical discussion or even bare dogmatic assertion of it, whether dialectic or some other such kataphatic claims about this zero or void being such-and-such, or even *not* being such-and-such. The text, and reader, will be (or not be) empty.

This is all we can say of our hypothesis for now, though we suspect that we have already said too much! Its proof, or falsification, will have to wait for a future study.

Finally, not a joke:

Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī walk into a bar.
Vimalakīrti is silent.
Mañjuśrī turns to him and says:
"I could have said that!"

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