Reconsidering the Meaning of Emptiness in the *Vimalakirtinirdeśasūtra*

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The Sanskrit text of the *Vimalakirtinirdeśasūtra* (VKS) is composed of 12 chapters in total. Among them the 4th chapter titled “Visiting [Vimalakīrti] to inquire after his health” (*Glānapratisammodanā*) is no doubt pivotal in that Mañjuśrī, bodhisattva of the greatest intelligence, visited and talked with Vimalakīrti over the meaning of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in a somewhat enigmatic way.

This scripture has long been available only in Tibetan translation by Chos nyid tshul khrims in the early ninth century and three Chinese translations by Zhi Qiān 支謙, 1) Kumārajiva (Jiùmóluóshí 鸠摩羅什), and Xuánzàng 玄奘. However, since a Sanskrit manuscript of this scripture was identified in the so-called Potala collection in the early twenty-first century by a Taisho-University Study Group, which was followed by their edition of the Sanskrit text in 2006, the situation surrounding the VKS has been dramatically changed. Based on this edition in comparison with the above-mentioned Tibetan and Chinese translations, several important studies have so far been carried out. Among them are translation works such as Takahashi and Nishino [2011] and Ueki [2011].

Reading through the Sanskrit text in collation with a facsimile publication of the manuscript, I came to notice that there still remains a passage of crucial importance yet to be discussed in detail. Therefore, the present paper intends to cast a new light on the hitherto undetermined meaning of emptiness found in chapter 4 of the VKS.

The points in relation to this problematic passage in question may be summarized into the following three:

1. What does the word “kena,” instr. sg. of the interrogative pronoun, mean in this expression?
2. In that case, what meaning does Vimalakīrti intend by this passage?
3. The third point is related to the religio-philosophical development of Mahāyāna thought concerning emptiness (*śūnyatā*) as well as the early stage of the tenet of...

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three-natures. The latter, they say, was introduced into Mahāyāna Buddhist circle by the Yogācāra school subsequent to the age of Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva.

1. First, I will focus on the key-word "kena" in that particular passage. The following is the translation and text of the passage in which two instances of the word "kena" are found. (The text is sectioned by the editor in accordance with Lamotte [1962].)

Chap. IV “Visiting [Vimalakirti] to inquire after his health”
§8: Mañjuśrī asked: “Householder, [why] is your house empty and without any servants?”
[Vimalakirti] replied: “Mañjuśrī, all Buddha-fields are also empty.”
[Vimalakirti] replied: “They are empty of ‘emptiness.’”
[Mañjuśrī] asked: “Concerning [the concept] ‘emptiness,’ what is emptiness?”
[Vimalakirti] replied: “Concerning [the concept] ‘emptiness,’ emptiness is non-conceptualization.”
[Mañjuśrī] asked: “Can emptiness be conceptualized?”
[Vimalakirti] replied: “Whatever [concept] may conceptualize [emptiness], that [concept] is also empty; however, it is not emptiness itself [but our concept of ‘emptiness’] that conceptualizes emptiness.”

§11: . . . “The illness arises from the defilements [that result from] false-conceptualization,…
§12: . . . “What is equality? It is the equality of nirvāṇa together with that of Self. Why is it so? Because the two, viz. both Self and nirvāṇa, are empty. Of what are they both empty? They both are empty of name-application (nāmodāhārenaite śnye), Neither of them, viz., neither Self nor nirvāṇa, is perfected [as long as they are verbally designated]. Therefore, one who sees such equality is to make no difference between illness and emptiness and [realize] that illness is itself emptiness.”

§8: Mañjuśrī aha: śnyam te grhate grham/ na ca te kaścid upasthāyakah/
[Vimalakirti] aha: sarvabuddhakṣetraṇy api Mañjuśrīh śnyāni/
[Mañjuśrī] aha: kena śnyāni*/
[Vimalakirti] aha: śnyatayā śnyāni/
[Mañjuśrī] aha: śnyatayāh kā śnyatā/
[Vimalakirti] aha: († aparikalpanā ca śnyatayāḥ śnyatā) */
[Vimalakirti] aha: yenāpi parikalpyeta tad api śnyam/ na ca śnyatāḥ śnyatām parikalpayati/
§11: . . . ‘yam vyādhir abhūtaparikalpakeśasamutthihah/. . . (SG [2006: 49])
§12: . . . katamā ca samatā, ātmasamatayā ca nirvānasamatā/ tat kasmād dhetoḥ/ ubhe ‘py ete śnye, yad uṣmā nirvānām ca/ kenaite śnye, nāmodāhārenaitē śnye**/ ubhāv apy etāv aparinaspannau, yad uṣmā nirvānām ca/ tena samadarśinā nānyo vyādhir nānyā śnyatā kartavyāḥ vyādhīr eva śnyatā/ (SG [2006: 50])
Note †: emended; aparikalpanāś ca śnyatayāḥ śnyatāḥ Ms., SG [2006].

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2. The above usage of "kena" found in both underlined parts may be understood in two different ways: First, based on a grammatical understanding of the above "kena" in the same sense as kena hetunā, it may be taken as a question of the reason for the emptiness of all Buddha-fields. Secondly, on the other hand, it may be also understood as a question of what it is that all Buddha fields are empty of.

The present paper aims at confirming the second interpretation from a few different angles related to the above-mentioned three points.

First, unlike other expressions for clearly questioning a reason such as kasya hetoh, kasmād dhetoh, kim and kutah found in the Sanskrit text of VKS, the above two usages of kena, i.e., kena [sarvabuddhakṣetrami] sūnyāṇi and kena ete [ātmā nirvāṇam ca] sūnye, appear to ask not the reason for the emptiness but instead the object of which those subjects are empty. This is because what a certain subject is empty of is usually expressed in Sanskrit by a word with an instrumental case-ending, which is typically found in the above second example marked with a double asterisk: “They both are empty of name-application.”

Secondly, it is to be noted that in the above §8, after Mañjuśrī asked, “kena sūnyāni,” Vimalakīrti replied, “sūnyataye sūnyāni.” As the text of §8 tells, the meaning of sūnyatā, according to Vimalakīrti, is non-conceptualization (aparikalpanā). Therefore, sūnyataye sūnyāni reasonably means in the context that they (= all Buddha-fields) are empty of [the concept] “emptiness.” This is the context in which Mañjuśrī’s question is naturally directed to what all Buddha-fields are empty of. This understanding agrees well with another usage of kena in §12 to which Vimalakīrti answers that both [Self and nirvāṇa] are empty of name-application (nāmodāhārenaite sūnye).

3. Next, let us look at the Tibetan and Chinese Translations (cf. SG [2004: 192–199]) of the above §8 and §12 in the VKS, chapter 4. In the following, Tibetan translation by Chos nyid tshul khrims is presented by sDe dge (D) edition in collation with Peking (P), while three Chinese translations by Zhi Qiān, Kumārajiiva and Xuánzàng are given with abbreviations “Zhi,” “Ku,” and “Xuan” respectively.

§8: 'Jam dpal gyis smras pa/ khyim bdag khyod kyi khyim 'di stong na khyod la gYog 'ga' yang med dam/ smras pa/ 'Jam dpal sngs rgyas kyi zhing thams cad kyang stong ngo// smras pa/ cis stong/ smras pa/ stong pa nyid kyi stong ngo// smras pa/ stong pa nyid la stong pa ci zhiig yod/ smras pa/ kun tu rtog pa ni/ stong pa nyid kyi stong pa'o// smras pa/ stong pa nyid kun tu btag par nus sam/ smras pa/ yongs su rtog pa de yang stong pa ste/ stong pa nyid ni stong pa nyid la mi rtog go// (D no. 176, Ma 199a5–7; P no. 843, Bu 205b8–206a2)

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Zhi: 文殊師利言。何以空無供養。維摩詰言。諸仏土与此舍皆空如空。又問。何謂為空。答曰。空於空。又問。解一為空。答曰。空無与之為空空。又問。空復誰為。答曰。思想者也。彼亦為空。 （T no. 474, vol. 14, 525c14-19）

Ku: 文殊師利言。居士。此室何以空無侍者。維摩詰言。諸仏國土亦復皆空。又問。以何為空。答曰。以空空。又問。空何用空。答曰。以無分別空故空。又問。空可分別耶。答曰。分別亦空。 （T no. 475, vol. 14, 544b28-c3）

Xuan: 妙吉祥言。居士。此室何以都無侍者。無垢稱言。一切仏土亦復皆空。問。何以空。答。以空空。又問。此空為是誰空。答曰。此空無分別空。又問。空性可分別耶。答曰。此能分別亦空。所以者何。空性不可分別為空。 （T no. 476, vol. 14, 568a16-21）

§12: mnyam pa nyid gang zhe na/ bdag mnyam pa nyid nas mya ngan las 'das pa mnyam pa nyid kyi bar du'o/ de ci'i phyir zhe na/ 'di lta ste/ bdag (P 'khor ba) dang mya ngan las 'das pa gnyi ga'ang stong pa'i phyir ro/ de gnyi ga cis stong zhe na/ ming du brjod pa de gnyis stong ste/ de dag kyang yongs su ma grub pa'o/ de ltar mnyam pa nyid mthong ba des nad nyid gzhan ma yin/ stong pa nyid gzhan du mi byed de/ nad nyid stong pa nyid do/ （D Ma 200b2-3; P Bu 207a6-7）

Zhi: 何謂為等。謂我等泥洹等。所以者何。此二皆空。何名為空。所言為空。二者如是。凡聖道成皆從平等病亦不異。 （T vol. 14, 526a21-24）

Ku: 云何平等。為我等涅槃等。所以者何。此二皆空。以何為空。但以名字故空。如此二法無決定性。得是平等無有余病。唯有空病空病亦空。 （T vol. 14, 545a10-13）

Xuan: 云何平等。謂我等涅槃二俱平等。所以者何。二性空故。此二既無誰復為空。但以名字故說為空。此二不異平等見已無有余病。唯有空病。應觀如是空病亦空。所以者何。如是空病畢竟空故。 （T vol. 14, 568c7-11）

It seems clear that the above double- and single-underlined renderings reflect the instrumental case-endings of Sankrit “kena,” “śūnyatā,” and “nāmodāhāreṇa,” though the Tibetan translation for “nāmodāhāreṇa” should have rightly transmitted “ming du brjod pas” rather than “ming du brjod pa.”

4. Now, let us turn to modern translations²) based on the above Chinese and Tibetan versions, as well as two recent Japanese translations based on the newly published Sanskrit edition of the VKS. The following are those translations for the above double- and single-underlined parts in chronological order, to which English rendering is tentatively provided in round brackets by the present author. Also the source text or translation on which they are based is indicated thereafter. （Chinese translations by Kumārajiva and Xuánzàng are abbreviated “Ch-Ku” and “Ch-Xuan” respectively，）

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§8:
Lamotte [1962: 225]: “De quoi sont-ils vides?” “Ils sont vides de vacuité (*śūnyatāśūnya*).” (“Of what are they empty?” “They are empty of emptiness.”) (Tib + Ch-Xuan)

Nagao [1973: 68]: “どうして空ですか” “空そのもの（空性）として空なのです” (“Why are they empty?” “As emptiness itself, they are empty.”) (Tib)

Thurman [1976: 43]: “What makes them empty?” “They are empty because of emptiness.” (Tib)

Ōshika [1988: 53]: “何によって空であるか” “空性によって空である” (For what reason are they empty?” “They are empty because of emptiness.”) (Tib)

Luk [1990: 51]: “Of what is the Buddha land void?” “It is void of voidness.” (Ch-Ku)

Takahashi and Nishino [2011: 92]: “どうして空っぽなのですか” “空のゆえに空っぽなのです” (“Why are they empty?” “They are empty because of emptiness.”) (Skt)

Ueki [2011: 191]: “何によって空なのでしょうか” “空の本性によって，[それらは] 空なのです” (“For what reason are they empty?” “They are empty because of their nature of emptiness.”) (Skt)

§12:
Lamotte [1962: 229–230]: “Pourquoi sont-ils vides tous les duex? —En tant que simples designations (*nāmadheya*), ils sont, tous les deux, vides (*śūnya*) et...” (“Why are they both empty? As simple designations, they both are empty and...”)

Nagao [1973: 72]: “この両者がいかに空なのか. 概念的に説かれたこの両者が空なのであ り,....” (“In what way are they both empty? The two taught by concepts are empty and...”)

Thurman [1976: 45]: “How can both be void? As verbal designation, they both are void,”

Ōshika [1988: 56]: “この両者はどうして空であるかと言えば，名称を言語するこの両者は空で あり,....” (“Why are they both empty? Because they both are referred to by names, they are empty.....”)

Luk [1990: 53]: “Why are both void? Because they exist only by names....”

Takahashi and Nishino [2011: 98]: “なぜ両者が空であるかといえば，名称をあげつらうことによって両者は空である。” (“Why are they both empty? Because they are given names, they both are empty.”)

Ueki [2011: 199]: “何によって，この両者は空なのですか. 実に言葉で言及されたもの であることによって，この両者は[実体がなく]空なのであります.” (“For what reason are they both empty? Because they are referred to by words, they both are [without substance and] empty.”)
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5. As was discussed under the above section 2, "kena" in §8 and §12 can be fully understood when we take it as an interrogative pronoun for asking not the reason for but the content of what the subject is empty of. In this respect, Lamotte and Luk’s understanding of the double-underlined part in §8 may be confirmed though their renderings of "vacuité" and "voidness" are to be understood as meaning concepts of "vacuité" and "voidness" as such. On the other hand, concerning the single-underlined part in §12, all the above translations cannot strictly be confirmed. "Pourquoi," "why," "for what reason," "how," or "in what way" for the usage of "kena" there does not exactly fit the context. In this connection, it can also be accepted that the "name-application (nāmodāhāra)" used in Vimalakīrti’s explanation does not refer to the reason for the emptiness of both Self and nirvāṇa but to that which both Self and nirvāṇa are equally empty of.

Though indeed being named and thereby differentiated, all dharmas by nature, even including emptiness (śūnyatā), are ineffable and empty of concepts or name-application, —this religio-philosophical thought revealed in the 4th chapter of VKS is in fact shared by several Mahāyāna scriptures such as *Kāsyapaparivarta* 3) , *Jñānālokālakāra* 4) , and *Bhavasamkrāntisūtra* 5) . The topic on the nature of emptiness (śūnyatā) found in the early Mahāyāna scriptures and treatises 6) no doubt remains further inquiry.

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**Notes**

1) The matter of whether the *Fōshū Wēimójié jīng* 仏説維摩詰経 (T no. 474) was translated by Zhi Qiān or by Fāhū 法護, wholly or partially, has long been discussed. See Kawano [2006] pp. 140, 209 (n. 8).


6) See also Silk [2014] p. 176.

**References**


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