Concerning The Philosophic Influence of *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa sūtra* upon Chinese Culture¹⁾

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There is no need to say that China is one of the oldest country in Asia side by side with India. Not only is it an old country, but also the Chinese value their historical tradition, having the custom of so-called *shang-ku* (尚古 to esteem the past) is the first characteristic of that country and its provinces. The second Chinese cultural trait lies in their esteem for morality. And on this point it is in marked contrast to India which held religion in high esteem. Thirdly the Chinese people would be said to be most real and social.

To these Chinese proper characteristics on the side of their people and culture, what influence has been added by Buddhism introduced from India? It will be said that this problem is an interesting and important matter concerning the history of thought.

Śākyamuni (saint of the *Śākya* clan), *Gautama Shiddhartha* (B. C. 466-386) was born about the middle of the fifth century before Christ, a contemporarian with Confucius (孔子, B. C. 551-478) in China who is the founder of Confucianism (Ju-Chiao: 儒教). But Buddhism which originated from the very teaching of Buddha *Śākyamuni* himself was introduced into China actually only at the middle of first century of Christian era, more than five hundred years after its founder's death and the Buddhism of those days was called Mahāyāna (大乘), large vehicle.

Mahāyāna Buddhism was a progressive and revolutionary religious movement which may be traced in its origin even to the *Mahāsaṃghika* (Ta-chung-pu: 大衆部) of its opposing party, Hīnayāna (小乘), small vehicle. The *Mahāsaṃghika*

developed more than one century before Christ. Thus we may say that among the religious and social movement of Mahāsaṃghika against to the conservative Theravāda (Shang-tso-pu: 上座部) or Chang Lao p'ai (長老派) themselves, themselves, there were important indications for the generalization of Buddhism.

Carrying those religious and cultural traits of Buddhism, there was brought together an unique canon named *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* (Wei-mo-ching) in the main stream of *Mahāyāna*. The date of this sūtra is supposed to be about the Christian era and the place of its production is thought to be someplace east-north area of India, concretely saying, perhaps near the old Vesālī district, now in the Indian province of West Bengal which is a western direction of Bangladesh.

The description concerning Buddha Śākyamuni's last sermon tour and his death is recorded in the *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta* in Pāli among the *Dīgha Nikāya* which was translated into Chinese with the title of *Yu Hsing Ching* (遊行經: the sūtra of Buddha's Pilgrimage) among the *Chang A Han* (長阿含). There is a paragraph that conveys Buddha's praise for the people of Vesālī (Vajjhis clan) because of their democratic character.

Mahāyānic sūtra of *Vimalakīrti* has this Vesālī town as its setting. The hero *Vimalakīrti* himself is a merchant who has a family and was a doer of good works and was a justman.

But as the Mahāyānic sūtra, *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* was intended to express the doctrine of *śūnyatā* (K'ung Kuan: 空觀, devoidness) and on this point this sūtra can be said to be made after the *Prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra* (*Pom-Jo-Ching*: 般若經) which is the original expression of *Mahāyāna* philosophy. The hero of *Prajñāpāramitā* is Mañjuśrī *Bodhisattva* (文殊師利菩薩: wên-shu-shih-li) who represents the wisdom (*prajñā*). He is the partner of *Vimalakīrti* in *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*. *Śūnyatā* signifies the standpoint of true Buddhistic wisdom, and the meaning of this wisdom is found in leading a practical life. Such action which originated from the wisdom is called *upāya* (方便: fang-pien), theoretically. And in *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* *Vimalakīrti* himself expresses this *upāya* to the merchants and citizens of Vesālī. Thus the essence of this sūtra lies in the theory of "Not throwing away the True Way, while one acts like an ordinary person" (不捨道法, 現凡夫事) or "From the source of the absence of base, express all thing"

(從無住本，立一切法) as expressed on the words in the *sūtra*. Therefore *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* has some unique expression both in its literature and in its philosophy. Especially the entrance of Śāriputra, who is the wisest man among the direct disciples of Buddha, signifies the standpoint of Hinayāna and his defeat by the words of Vimalakīrti's means the victory of Mahāyānic spiritualism.

Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa is a splendid literature and it has 14 chapters. In the first chapter of this *sūtra*, there is a famous phrase to the effect that if one has a pure mind, then he will live in the Pure Land. This is the expression of the fundamental philosophy of the *sūtra* and afterwards the 'Pure Land Sect' (淨土教) issued from this theory as well as from other Pure Land *sūtras* like *Large, Small Amitābha-sūtra* and *Kuan-ching* (觀經). In India already this *sūtra* was studied successively by two representative Buddhist scholars, one was Nāgārjuna and the other was Vasubandhu. Nāgārjuna (ca. 150-230 A. D.) quoted frequently the phrases of this *sūtra* in his *Śāstra to Mahāprajñāpāramitā* (*Ta-chih-tu-lun*: 大智度論, Commentary to 般若經, 100 vols.) and especially formed owing to the śūnyatā doctrine of the same his famous formula of eight denying middle path (八不中道) in his main work *madhyamaka vṛtti*. Vasubandhu (ca. 350-430 A. D.) also developed its practical and religious side, i. e., the doctrine of 'Buddhakṣetra' chapter into 'five meditation gates' (Wu-nien-mên: 五念門) in his *Sukhāvati-vyūhōpadeśa* (*Wang-shêng-lun* or *Ching-t'u-lun*: 往生論, 淨土論).

We know by one of the Chinese translations of this *sūtra*, there was another title for it: Wondrous renunciation (*acintyavimokṣa*, 不可思議解脫). This is the same name as the latter part of *Avatamsaka-sūtra* (華嚴經), i. e., 'ju-fa-chieh-p'im (入法界品)' that is the story of Shan ts'ai-t'ung tzü' (善財童子, 't'ung tüz' means a 'child') on his seeking true religious world. And the name of the sixth chapter in *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* is also 'wonderful renunciation.' We may understand the goal of the *sūtra* lies in such religious freedom. *Avatamsaka-sūtra* is rather the development of the religious spiritualism of *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*.

Vimalakīrtinirdeśa-sūtra was translated into Chinese seven times and among them only three translations are extant. The oldest one was translated by Chih-ch'ien (支謙, a man of Wu 吳 about the third century), but it was not greatly

used because the words on translation was not superior to the next one which was translated by Kumârajîva (344-413 A. D.: 鳩摩羅什) at the first of the fifth century. To this new translation, an excellent commentary titled *Chu-wei-mo-ching* (註維摩經) was added by the translator himself, Kumârajîva, and his disciples, Sêng-chao (僧肇: 384-414 A. D.) and Chu-Tao-Shêng (竺道生: 355-434 A. D.), etc. And this commentary became from that time the basis for the study of the study of this sūtra. Chia-hsiang Ta-shih Chi-tsang (嘉祥大師吉藏, the founder of Sa-lun-tsung: 三論宗) and T'ien-t'ai Ta-shih-Chih-gieh (天台大師智顗: 533-597 A. D., the founder of T'ien-t'ai-tsung: 天台宗) both studied this sūtra concerning Nāgārjuna and his Madhyâmikâh (中觀派). And each made annotated editions for the sūtra. Chi-tsang tried to depict rather the negative side of logic of the sūtra, but Chih-gieh tried especially to elucidate the middle way philosophy of the same sūtra. Afterwards the violent spirit of denial of this sūtra was developed in the direction of Zen Buddhism, the founder of which was Dharma the Great Teacher (Bodhidharma) who went to China 520 or 527 A. D. and died 528 or 536 A. D.

In Zen Buddhism the hero name *Vimalakīrti* in this sūtra was used in the title of Ching Ming Chü Shih (淨名居士). We should consider this aspect of the influence on Chinese culture of this sūtra very much. The third one of the translations extant is that of Hsüan Chuang (玄奘) who brought to China from India the doctrine of *Vijñānamātratā* (唯識) which was based on Vasubandhu's Yogâcāra-school. But compared with the influence of the translation by Hsüan Chuang with that of Kumarâjîva, the result of the latter was very great.

In the Ming and Shing (Manchu) dynasties, the revival of Buddhism in Tao dynasty prompted very much. *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was also recovered and again the ideas and practise of Buddhasmṛti in Zen life began.

The culture of China had influenced for long time upon Japan. As the true Buddhist canon, originally made in India, was then transported into China, and was influenced very much by her culture and life, and finally arrived in Japan giving full play to the genuine meaning of religion. Such a sūtra *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is a most prominent work among the 'Buddhistic Laws conveyed through three countries-India, China and Japan' (三国伝通仏法).

Now I will speak about the influence of this sūtra especially upon Japan. The

Meiji Restoration which occurred 1868 A. D. was a big pressure upon Japanese Buddhists who had been raised side by side with Shintoists. The Restoration may be said to be a Japanese Religious Reformation. That is to say, because of this Reformation, various direct social and cultural changes were brought out in Japanese religious life. And that was not reserved only to formal religious significance, but was rather a reform of consciousness itself. Then the three hundred years old social order of the Edo Period was broken and the system was fundamentally reconstructed. With the liberation from 'National Isolation' (鎖国) which so long had dominated Japan promptly rushed into the adoption of European and American cultures and the commencement of a national education system. One of such cultural and social educational results was the issue of the magazine titled *HANSEIKAI-ZASSHI* (*Journal of the Reflection Association*, 反省会雑誌) in 20 years' of Meiji. The magazine was later retitled *Chûô-kôron* (*Central Review*, 中央公論) which has been continuously issued until now. We should note that this journal originally belonged to the Japanese Buddhist social reformers of the beginning of Meiji Era who were intending to revive the Buddhism in their country. And European (English) editions of the same magazines were issued until 1899. At Literary Course of Tokyo University, the first Japanese public university founded after the Meiji Restoration in that country, the Buddhist text *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* was for the first time adopted and lectured upon by Professor Tanzan Hara in 1879 who was a high-ranking priest belonging to the Zen Soto sect. After that he also lectured upon the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* (大乘起信論), because, as well as *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, the latter was understood in those days as the fundamental text for teaching Buddhism. Afterwards Dr. Daisetsu Suzuki very greatly valued these two Buddhist canons. In the foreign edition of the magazine *HANSEIKAI-ZASSHI*, Kakichi Ōhara began to publish the English translation of *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* from 1898 and after thirteen serial publications he finished it in the next year. This publication based on Kumārajīva's translation into Chinese was the first publication of the sūtra in European language. And some passages were quoted already in the note of "Prasannapada nāme mādhyamika vṛtti" (Tib: dbu-martsabahi hgrel-pa tsig-gsal-ba śes-bya-ba) of Candrakīrti (edited by V. Poussin,

1903-13).

As the successive scholar of Zen Buddhism who followed Dr. Suzuki in Japan, Dr. Shin'ich Hisamatsu also very much respected *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*. He wrote a book titled *Seven Laws on Vimala* (維摩の七則) in 1960. In that book he tried to depict the seven fundamental faces of the sūtra, i. e. (1) calm meditation (宴坐), (2) law (*dharma*, 法), (3) *Buddhakṣetra* (land of Buddha, 仏土), (4) exercising place (道場), (5) disease (病), (6) practical exercise (行道), and (7) silence (黙). He explained these laws from the standpoint of his belief, and he named his own belief as F. A. S. Belief, that is 'To awake to Formless self, To stand on the standpoint of All mankind, To create Superhistorical history.' In the conclusion, Dr. Hisamatsu sympathized very much with the household doctrine (在家道) of the sūtra. And perhaps the true direction of Buddhism will lie along that line.

Thus the sub-influence of Chinese Buddhism in Japan is very large especially concerning *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*. As Dr. Hisamatsu says, the true way of Buddhism should be in the style of layman's worship and its model is precisely *gṛhaspati* (*gṛhapati*, householder) *Vimalakīrti*.

Here I will add some aspects concerning *Vimalakīrti* himself in China and Japan. Once when the sūtra of *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* was introduced into Central Asia from India, several scenes of it were expressed so that people there could understand them. Such expressions were conveyed to T'un Huang (敦煌) and some of them have been preserved until now.

Those which were made in the province of T'un Huang, etc., are called *Wei-mo-pieng* (維摩變). Schematic expression of the sūtra and their representative scenes was that of the conversation between Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī and Layman *Vimalakīrti* accompanied many disciples and Bodhisattvas. People in China who were impressed very much by such scenes understood *Vimalakīrti* the man of a strong character, especially on discussion. Thus he had become a popular figure among Chinese, both monks and laymen. Therefore for example in the T'ang dynasty the poet Wang Wei (王維, 699-759) looked up to *Vimalakīrti* as his model and called himself Wang Ma Chieh (王摩詰) because the name of 'Ma Chieh' was the translation of '*Vimalakīrti*.' Other famous scenes of the sūtra that were

painted in T'un Huang caves were scenes of women's entrance, of which the one concerns about twelve thousand witches followed the devil (*pāpīyas*, 波旬), and the other is that of a heavenly maiden who scattered the flower to the monks and Bodhisattvas in Vimalakīrti's room. The latter scene is famous as that of *T'ien Nü San Hua* (天女散華) which means the salutation to Buddhas. Among the Chinese and recently late actor Mei Lan-fang (梅蘭芳, 1894-1961) was famous for his play concerning this theme.

Thus we can conclude the study of Vimalakīrti and sūtra that bears his name in Chinese with the following.

The religious philosophy of the sūtra has been developed so widely in China that the research concerning this sūtra is of great scale. Secondly the cultural unfolding of this sūtra which based on such philosophy of *advaya* (non duality) or *śūnyatā* (voidness) has spread even into the lives of the people.

Thirdly the unique character of the Chinese mainly concerning earthly matters was changed in the direction of religion by the influence of this sūtra.

The fundamental theory of Buddhism is that of *pratītyasamutpāda* (緣起). In the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* this doctrine has a new styled expression bounded upon the spirit of democracy. Buddhism that had originated in India flourished for one thousand and five hundred years only in its native land, though it has been conveyed toward south direction and north direction both beyond the boundary of the country and each has been called 'Southern Buddhism' (*Hīnayāna*) and 'Northern Buddhism' (*Mahāyāna*). In his work *The Doctrine of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Dr. T. Suzuki Daisetsu explained that the Buddhism of China, Korea and Japan should be called 'Eastern Buddhism' (東方仏教). Probably this is wise, the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* especially is the representative champion of the Eastern Buddhism which so much influenced the culture and morals of China.

Nowadays we can say that the age of Western Buddhism has arrived. For more than one century in Japan scholars have researched both Southern and Eastern Buddhism and developed Northern Buddhism by comparing Western philosophy and Christianity and also done research concerning the historical development of Indian philosophy. And now the study of Buddhism is refreshed both in its aim and method. As for *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, say, there are already two English, one

French and one German translations.²⁾ And on the other hand the research of a Tibetan translation of the sūtra also has been developed. Through the result of such research and works we may explore the true way of Oriental world.³⁾

First I said that China is a land of morality and therefore the Chinese has greatly revered wise men's words and their social expressions. The Buddhism that was translated in China was also a store of wise words for the Chinese. They had greatly utilized this stock and made new styles of Buddhism such as Zen Buddhism and Nen-butsu (念仏) or Pure Land Worship (浄土教). These two had been developed separately, mainly in the T'ang and Sung Dynasties, but afterwards, in the Ming and Shing (Manchu) Dynasties they were combined in the style of '念仏禪,' worshipping Buddha Amita and Meditation on the layman's life that has been called also '居士禪,' Layman Zen Buddhism. On this point we may say that the orthodox theme of *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* which had been made in India originally has a full exploitation in China where the domestic and political characteristics are dominant compared with religious India. Because in India the living style of priests or monks which was the renunciation of the world was considered superior. So the expression of the sūtra that put pressure upon the monks and emphasized the spiritualism which matched on one side to Zen Buddhism and on the other side to Pure Land Worship was widely adapted by the Chinese. So I conclude that the Buddhism of the Layman's style (在家仏教, householders'one), Pure Land Worship, and Mahāyāna, these three, are one fundamental spirit and unique evidence that the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* has proved in China and Japan not only on religion but also on the culture and morality.

Lastly I may add some words concernig the first Orientalist in Japan. He is Shuntai Ishikawa (1842-1931) who was born at Kanazawa as the son of Shin Sect priest in 1842 near the ending of Edo or Tokugawa Era. He visited Paris and London in September of 1872 and returned to Yokohama in July of the next year. Therefore this year and precisely this month are one century after his voyage. Three years after he sent two young Japanese monks who both belonged to Shin Sect, one was Kenju Kasahara (1852-1883) and the other was Bunyū Nanjō (1849-1972) to Max Müller in Oxford University for the study of Sanscrit, because Shuntai himself had been astonished very much when he saw Sanscrit

Biddhistic scriptures in Europe and was awakened to the value and meaning of the study of them. Shuntai had read the Bible in the Chinese translation and now Kanazawa University preserves the book in which we can see his marginal notes in cinnabar red (vermillion). He wrote nearly one hundred books which are almost made for social education. Among them there is *Lecture on Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* (維摩經講義). Therefore we can substantiate one more proof of the philosophical influence of the sūtra in the East. (5 July, 1973)

1) A summary of this paper was read on the occasion of the 29th International Congress of Orientalists at Paris, on 19 of July 1973.

2) Those are 1. 'The Vimālakīrti nirdeśa sūtra. (The Discourse of the wonderful Law of Emancipation)' by Kakichi Ōhara, Tokyo, 1897~98. 2. 'The Vimalakīrti Sūtra, Vimalakīrti's Discourse on Emancipation' by Hōkei Izumi, Kyoto' 1924-28. 3. 'L'Enseignement de Vimalakīrti. (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)' by Étienne Lamotte, Louvain, 1962. 4. 'Das Sūtra Vimalakīrti, Das Sūtra über die Erlösung' by Jakob Fischer and Takeno Yokota, Tokyo, 1944. Dr. Lamotte graciously quoted on his above mentioned book pp. 77-78 etc. from 'journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies' vol.Ⅶ No. 1, 1958 on my article which is included in my book, "The Philosophical Researches on Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra," p. 34.

3) Ekai Kawaguchi's translation into Japanese of Tibetan Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa appeared in 1928. And 'Tibetan Text of Vimalakīrtinirdeśa' edited by Jisshu Oshika was included in 'Acta Indologica' I, Naritasan Shinshoji, 1970.