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Then the Buddha said to the venerable Subhuti [Shibodai Sonja], "Subhuti, go to the Licchavi Vimalakirti to inquire about his illness . "

Subhuti replied, "Lord, I am indeed reluctant to go to this good man to inquire about his illness. Why? My Lord, I remember one day, when I went to beg my food at the house of the Licchavi Vimalakirti in the great city of Vaisali, he took my bowl and filled it with some excellent food and said to me, 'Reverend Subhuti, take this food if you understand the equality of all things, by means of the equality of material objects , and if you understand the equality of all the attributes of the Buddha, by means of the equality of all things. Take this food if, without abandoning desire, hatred, and folly, you can avoid association with them; if you can follow the path of the single way without ever disturbing the egoistic views; if you can produce the knowledges and liberations without conquering ignorance and the craving for existence; if, by the equality of the five deadly sins, you reach the equality of liberation; if you are neither liberated nor bound; if you do not see the Four Holy Truths, yet are not the one who "has not seen the truth"; if you have not attained any fruit, yet are not the one who "has not attained"; if you are an ordinary person, yet have not the qualities of an ordinary person; if you are not holy, yet are not unholy; if you are responsible for all things, yet are free of any notion concerning anything."

"Take this food, reverend Subhuti, if, without seeing the Buddha, hearing the Dharma, or serving the Sangha, you undertake the religious life under the six heterodox masters; namely, Purana Kasyapa, Maskarin Gosaliputra, Samjayin Vairatiputra, Kakuda Katyayana, Ajita Kesakambala, and Nirgrantha Jnatiputra, and follow the ways they prescribe.

"Take this food, reverend Subhuti, if, entertaining all false views, you find neither extremes nor middle; if, bound up in the eight adversities, you do not obtain favorable conditions; if, assimilating the passions, you do not attain purification; if the dispassion of all living beings is your dispassion, reverend; if those who make offerings to you are not thereby purified; if those who offer you food, reverend, still fall into the three bad migrations; if you associate with all Maras; if you entertain all passions; if the nature of passions is the nature of a reverend; if you have hostile feelings toward all living beings; if you despise all the Buddhas; if you criticize all the teachings of the Buddha; if you do not rely on the Sangha; and finally, if you never enter ultimate liberation.'

"Lord, when I heard these words of the Licchavi Vimalakirti, I wondered what I should say and what I should do, but I was totally in the dark. Leaving the bowl, I was about to leave the house when the Licchavi Vimalakirti said to me, 'Reverend Subhuti, do not fear these words, and pick up your bowl. What do you think, reverend Subhuti? If it were an incarnation created by the Tathagata who spoke thus to you, would you be afraid?'

"I answered, 'No indeed, noble sir!' He then said, 'Reverend Subhuti, the nature of all things is like illusion, like a magical incarnation. So you should not fear them. Why? All words also

have that nature, and thus the wise are not attached to words, nor do they fear them. Why? All language does not ultimately exist, except as liberation. The nature of all things is liberation.'

"When Vimalakirti had discoursed in this way, two hundred gods obtained the pure doctrinal vision in regard to all things, without obscurity or defilement, and five hundred gods obtained the conformatory tolerance. As for me, I was speechless and unable to respond to him. Therefore, Lord, I am reluctant to go to this good man to inquire about his illness."

In the last section of this sutra, Mokuren Sonja [Maudgalyayana] and Kasho Sonja [Mahakasyapa] were both called upon by the Buddha. Now they are followed by Shibodai Sonja; he also is ordered by the Buddha to go visit the ailing Vimalakirti.

Shibodai Sonja was one of the top nine disciples of the Buddha and was famous for being the most eloquent of all of them. In the Diamond Sutra there is a section in which the Buddha has a conversation with Shibodai Sonja in which, among the Buddha's disciples, he understood the meaning of "ku" [the Void, Emptiness, Nothingness] better than anyone else.

When we hear the word "Emptiness" we think it means that there is nothing at all--a nihilistic impression--but this is not the case. That Mind in which there are no thoughts and nothing held on to to be thought about--this is Emptiness. One time Shibodai Sonja was doing zazen and angels sent flowers wafting down from above. Shibodai Sonja said to them, "Why do you send these flowers?" The angels answered that his teaching on Emptiness had moved them so much that they had sent down the flowers. The angels answered in this way. Then Shibodai Sonja said, "I have taught about Emptiness yet I haven't said a thing." The angels responded, saying, "You haven't spoken a word and we haven't heard a thing. This is truly Emptiness." And once again they sent flowers down. In this same way, when there are no extraneous thoughts or delusions in the mind our Mind is the same as that of Shibodai Sonja.

To this same Shibodai Sonja the Buddha made the request to go and visit Vimalakirti. He told him to go and visit him on his sickbed. Shibodai Sonja responded, "No, no, I can't go and visit Vimalakirti. That is just impossible. He explained that it was because of something that had happened quite a long time before. He had been out on *takuhatsu* [alms receiving] and had gone to the house of Vimalakirti. Vimalakirti had said to him at that time, "Shibodai Sonja, you are still making a distinction in your mind between those who are wealthy and those who are poor, aren't you? This feast of food here, if you can receive it--no matter what you are given--seeing anything you receive as equal, if you can see all food as equal, then you can see everything as equal. If you can see everything as equal, then you can see all food as equal. Poor people and rich people should be treated equally. No matter whether a delicious thing or an untasty thing is put in your bowl, if you can be thankful for either in the same way, then you may receive my offering. This is what Vimalakirti said to him.

When Vimalakirti had spoken to Kasho Sonja he had said to him that if Kasho Sonja was going to poor people's homes for *takuhatsu* in order to liberate them then that was mistaken. Now Shibodai Sonja was going to wealthy people's houses to receive offerings. Wealthy people have a good life, and because of this if they aren't careful they will lose their deep spiritual sense. Aware of this, Shibodai Sonja was going to their homes to liberate them. For this Shibodai Sonja went out. Vimalakirti was warning him severely about that way of doing it. The Vimalakirti Sutra teaches that Emptiness is something easy to grasp conceptually but that it is something we have to look at intimately and carefully to really see. This is what was being taught.

In Japanese the character for "harmony" is written with symbols that represent food being put in one's mouth. We don't have to use any difficult explanations. Just to put food in our mouths and relieve that irritable hungry sensation--this naturally brings about an easier, more comfortable feeling. For humans it is eating which is the most basic need. In proof we see that great peaceful mood a baby is in just after it has drunk fully from its mother's breast. It can

play all by itself with a toy after that, and in a truly good and cheerful mood. An old Chinese proverb says, "To be satisfied with a meal and..." People are irritable when they get hungry. They get impatient and aren't peaceful and easy. The word "peace" in *kanji* [the Chinese characters that comprise much of the Japanese written language] is the character for "harmony" and a perfectly balanced scale in which both trays are even and equal, with the pointer straight up. Those scales are equally laden. The *kanji* in this same way expresses peace: the world where everyone eats equally is the world which fulfills the conditions for peace. In our world there are meals which can cost 10,000 dollars. There are some people who eat this way every night and there are some who don't even have enough for one meal and must struggle. These latter are 100,000 times as many as the former. This is not going to bring any world peace.

In the Buddha's teachings from the old days we see the word "equal" many times. It is said that what is given to be eaten should be equal for everyone although offerings may vary from person to person. Even though there may be many living together in a temple they should all receive the same amounts of food. If not it will not be peaceful and harmonious. Among the many different people who live in the temple there are those who have been there for a short time and those who have been there for a long time, some with much responsibility and some with very little responsibility, and in the same way, the wisdom among them is different. Here there are, of course, differences--all of these distinctions. But when it comes to eating, these people are all to be given the same thing. We don't eat with our positions, we eat with our bodies. It can't be expected that those who are in high positions should get more food or more calories to nourish their bodies. Eating makes us harmonious, and where everyone shares food together there is a big, peaceful feeling.

To go into it one step deeper, there are words in Zen which mean that everyone will at a certain time work together. When there is work to be done in the temple then everyone from the top priest to the youngest novice all come to work when this order is announced. Today when buildings are built or when roads are constructed, these words and orders are still used. The person who made these rules for practice was Hyakujo Zenji of the T'ang dynasty in China. He lived until the age of 95 and even when he was 80 or 90 he never rested from work. When the orders were given for everyone to work he would come out and observe those very same rules which he had written. He would follow them completely. He would work together with everyone. People around him felt sorry for him and said to him, "You are very old. Don't force yourself. Please rest"--and they tried to make him stop working. One person who was with him was trying to be sympathetic and hid Hyakujo Zenji's tools. Hyakujo Zenji came out to work but his tools were gone so he went back inside again. That day he didn't come to the meals. A kind of hunger strike ensued. But this wasn't the kind of hunger strike where someone was trying to get a pay raise; he was saying that he wanted to also be allowed to work. Everyone was worried and wondered why he didn't come to eat. When they asked him about this they received that famous answer, "One day without working is one day without eating." If we don't work on a certain day then we aren't able to receive food that day. This is not an order but an independent way of looking at the situation. When Hyakujo Zenji's tools were finally put out for him again he very joyfully went back to work. Then he joyfully received his meals as well. In this same way everyone works together and eats the same things. In this is born a natural peace. To live brightly and smoothly like this is the way of buddhas. This is the level on which the Three Treasures of Buddha, Sangha and Dharma are so deeply appreciated.

In the middle section of the Edo Period, about 300 years ago, there was a man named Bankei Zenji. He also was always saying that food must be equal. He was strict about this and observed it himself. He would say that the reason Buddhism was failing was that one person among many--the head priest--was getting better and different food from the rest of the people and was treated specially. He refused to do this and always ate with everyone.

One time Bankei Zenji received a rare and very special eggplant when eggplants were not in season at all. One monk made a delicious dish with the eggplant and gave it to Bankei Zenji to eat. Bankei Zenji said, "What a delicious-looking eggplant. I didn't know they grew like this

in this season; do you have some for everyone?" Of course there wouldn't be eggplant for everyone. The feudal lord from whom it had been a present said that he had brought it because he wanted Bankei Zenji to eat it- Bankei Zenji wouldn't agree to this and said they had to cut it up into small pieces and feed some to each person in the group. He put it in the soup that had been made for everyone and ate it together with them.

Bankei Zenji's Sangha had many and various people in it. They received many things that couldn't be used. They had received some miso that couldn't be used; half of it had begun to go bad. One day Bankei, eating some miso, said, "This is delicious! Is there some for everybody here?"

"No, there is other miso--everyday miso--for everyone. But it is spoiled and tastes bad. This miso is not for everyone; we just received a little. Here, please eat it." Bankei Zenji said, "To ask me to eat only this is like asking me not to eat. I can't eat this miso then." With that he stopped eating, went into his room, closed the paper screens and didn't come out. The second hunger strike had begun. In the kitchen there was a monk named Dairyo on duty. He said that Hyakujo's kindness had gone too far. "You have made problems for everyone." Dairyo, the cook, began a hunger strike outside the paper screens. Bankei Zenji was inside, behind the screens. There were hunger strikes on both sides of the screen. After many days nothing was changing and an old grandfather of the neighborhood came in and tried to help, saying, "From now on we won't keep trying to feed good things just to you and you alone. We will also give you terrible tasting things. But this is not only about you not eating. There is another person outside here who is also not eating, and it is because of you. Please come out of your room on his behalf." When Hyakujo was asked in this way his mood changed and once again he joined everyone for meals, with all eating the same things. This is how severely these rules were kept.

In the olden days there was a book from China called *The Monkey King*. In it the head general of the land of Soso took his armies and went into the countryside. In one of these areas a local leader answered him with a jug of sake. The general, instead of drinking it with just a few of his close officers, decreed that the next day at the source of the river they would open the bottle and send the sake flowing down river--and that everyone should open their mouths and drink from the river water as the sake moved down through the river. Saying this he poured the sake into the river. Of course, as you put your mouth down to the water in that river there is no way that water was going to smell of the fragrance of sake. However, to drink with just a few people is not the way. To eat with everyone and to enjoy things with everyone together, to share joy and share troubles and struggles and to move and learn together is the way. Doing this, for the first time, people would feel that they didn't mind even giving up their whole lives for this general. In the *dojo* it is the same: if it is for this Master then it is not a waste to even give my life. This kind of deep vow is felt.

In politics it is said that we should have no differentiation between upper and lower, that in sharing everything evenly, harmoniously and without forcing, a peaceful world is born. Delicious and not-delicious things--as with life in the *dojo* --are all received as medicine to care for our bodies and our character and to develop them for the Path. These are important bases. Without attachment to our likes and dislikes we work in our everyday life, offering our life and developing our practice. In doing that we will be able to do greetings and speak in the same way to rich people and poor people, without differentiating. Whether someone is of a high position or of no position at all we can enjoy their company equally. A person who lives like this knows the meaning of void.

Shibodai Sonja thought that when Vimalakirti finished his Dharma lesson he would be freed, but it didn't work like that. Vimalakirti started in again with another talk--a very complex talk. While confirming he would negate; while negating he would confirm. Very complicated reasoning was being used to teach the essence of Emptiness.

The monks of the Hinayana consider that people are deluded and greedy, angry and ignorant. And it is thought that these things have to be cut away or we can't realize the Mind of Emptiness. Vimalakirti does not suggest this, saying rather that it is not about where the

three impurities of greed, anger and delusion are cut away. In the Zen text, the *Katto Shu*, there is a koan about the old grandmother who has given a monk a hermitage to stay in. There is this old grandmother and this one monk she took care of for many years, making a small hermitage on her own land near her house and for twenty years letting him live there and practice. She took care of him this whole time. She said to herself, "This monk should be about ripe by now. Let's make a test to see how ripe he actually is." This is how she was thinking. She called her granddaughter and told her to take the monk his food. She said to the granddaughter, "Grab hold of the monk and hug him tight. Ask him what he would do then." The granddaughter did this and the monk answered without a pause, "For three years on the cold stone the old pine tree knows no warmth." Whether it was for three years or however long, there was no warmth at all--a splendid answer.

The granddaughter thought that her grandmother would be delighted with this but instead the grandmother was furious. "I raised him for twenty years and he is a useless monk! An offering has had no meaning at all; it has gone to waste!" Saying this she kicked him out and burned down the hermitage.

In this koan where was the monk mistaken? Why was he thrown out of his hermitage? This has to be looked at by standing in the place of the monk in this situation. For humans the sexual desire is like the desire for food. It is a very basic and primary desire. It is powerful--a strong instinct. To cut this instinct completely has been a great challenge for all religions. To offer everything--our flesh and our bones--this is what Vimalakirti is teaching and Shibodai Sonja is being taught. Vimalakirti says to him, "That kind of effort--how much of our life will it use up? That monk is like a chilly rock without any living blood circulating through him. He is like a stone wall, only full of an egoistic wish to defend his own personal body and mind and using everything for that. The living being right in front of him--that one granddaughter right in front of him--why didn't he use some words that would liberate her? Vimalakirti is saying that if we are going to use all of our energy to cut desires, then for our whole life we will be doing only that. What is much more important than that is to grasp our Buddha-nature directly. If we are truly and actually living from that realized Buddha-nature--if we have that loving parental Mind--our desires will naturally become purified. That monk should have been able to inform this young granddaughter's actions with more kind and easy words.

In the Kannon Gyo it says that if we are persistently attached to unclear thoughts of sexuality, if we offer everything to the chanting of the name of Kannon-sama [Gwan Yin, Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion] we will be able to separate from our deluded desires. Kannon-sama is Buddha-nature. If we are always clear in our Buddha nature, no matter what physical desire might grab us we can naturally separate from that desire. This is not to cut desires. This is to be in the midst of a desire but not to give attention to it nor be attached to it--with the desire as is, to be liberated from our attachment to it. To put it a different way, while living in that slimy muck the pure white lotus blossoms up from that very mud. Without a speck of mud on it, it blooms. While living in the very midst of desires, to have that flower Buddha-nature blossom and come forth. This is how it has to be, truly--just like it is in the poem about coming out from behind the clouds that naturally move along the sky. That wan, dawn moon that was always there is revealed. From within ourselves, thinking that we are always being held down by those clouds of desire, we feel oppressed by those desires. And that morning moon of our clear Mind--we think we can't find it anywhere. But it is always shining without fail even if we can't see it. But if we go above those clouds, if we climb up beyond where those clouds are, they are no obstruction whatsoever. The clouds haven't disappeared. They are vaguely there. But the moon is shining brightly everywhere and illuminating everything with brilliant light. Because we are being held down by the clouds of those desires we can't see the bright light of that moon. We are always deluded and confused. Why don't we go beyond those desires and actually live in that clear Buddha-nature?

That monk had used great words: "For three years on the cold stone the old pine tree knows no warmth," But the essence of this is about being oppressed by those desires and always trying to get out from under them. "For three years on the cold stone the old pine tree knows no warmth." We don't need to create such a fixed, stuck form. If we come out from under

those desires and see what is really there we see that these desires are really nothing at all. On the whole these things that appear as desires are only slight changes in our Mind. While having them we can taste that flavor of not being attached to them but staying in that huge free and clear Mind instead. In the Heart Sutra it says clearly, "No ignorance and also no extinction of it." Those impurities of greed, ignorance and anger as well, these are nothing of a fixed or substantial nature either, but rather something which comes forth at this time and then again at another time, flickering and emerging. They are like those clouds that appear and then pass by. No matter how much we try to crush and extinguish them, as long as we are alive they will always be around. To not use up all of our precious time for that: it is fine if we have desires and fine if we don't have desires. That state of Mind which is not attached to being either way, to always give light to our radiant Buddha nature is the quickest and best way to work with this.

People who play the piano say they forget their fingers. If they notice their fingers all the time they can't play the keys so freely. While using the fingers to be able to forget the fingers so completely that the subtle taste of the piano is tasted--to have fingers but to not be aware of them playing--to forget the fingers is the way to move them best. People who run have to forget their feet or they can't run. If we notice our feet we are tired. To forget our feet is to have them and not have them at the same time. Because we forget our feet we can run even better. Humans are most healthy when we forget our body completely. If we are reading the newspaper or a magazine, those who notice the ad in that newspaper for stomach medicine are probably those who are having a stomach problem. To forget our body completely--to have a body and not be noticing it--is most healthy. We obstruct our Mind with many and various things that manifest in different moments--the passing flames of greed, anger and ignorance. These stop our mind short and if we are going to use our whole life trying to stop these we are wasting our time completely and will never know the Mind of Emptiness. While having these desires, to experience that state of mind of not being attached and consciously attentive to them--this is to understand Emptiness. This is what Vimalakirti is teaching..

To always wake up with our Buddha-nature and always work with our Buddha-nature, to live our daily life with our Buddha-nature and to realize always our Buddha-nature--this is the way we live within that world of desires which is always surrounding us. Even while those desires are everywhere we are not trapped in or bound by them. If we are not bound and trapped by them we don't need any liberation from them either. Therefore there is no need to purposely think about some idea of *satori* that we design in our brain and then try to attain that designed picture of enlightenment. To say it another way, to realize enlightenment is to not leave the slightest shadow of anything called "enlightenment" in our heads or our awareness. That idea of a Buddha-nature as well is not left in our state of mind. Yet in that, the Buddha-nature is not present. Rather, in accordance with that Buddha-nature our Mind is radiantly shining. Buddha-nature is a huge and open state of Mind which cannot be bound and limited by desires. This state of Mind, if well tasted, will bring us to know that place unattached to those desires.

It is not that there is no such thing as the Buddha-nature. But then again if we grab onto an idea of a Buddha-nature, that also is truly an obstacle in our clear Mind. "Learn all of the Dharma and do a full practice, yet even realizing this do not show any signs of having done it or realized it--then understanding that true meaning of Emptiness you can take home this food and eat it." This is how Vimalakirti had spoken to Shibodai Sonja.

Then Vimalakirti continues to teach him. "Shibodai Sonja! Don't think that only Buddhism is correct! Don't give rise to any such sectarian thoughts! To not be attached to anything at all -- not even Buddhism--this is the true teaching of the Buddha!"

Today there are so many religions but almost all of them crush that true working of the Truth because of the group ego--this group ego, this teaching which thinks it is the most correct teaching. Everyone within it is limited to a small, narrow frame of mind about their particular religion. Can you make one of the teachers of the "mistaken paths"--of the paths outside of the teaching of the Buddha--can you make one those teachers your teacher? If you can

become their disciple can you learn from them? If their teaching is mistaken and they fall into hell can you fall into hell with them? You have to be that free and that Mind without any loose ends must be realized or you can't call it the path of the Mahayana. Shibodai Sonja! Buddhism is without any form at all. No matter what religion you join, make that teacher your teacher and work together and move together. If you can embrace it that way completely then you can have this food.

To understand Emptiness is this understanding. Yet, in the world there are so many people who are suffering and so many who are living with a mistaken point of view. They have no faith and live for the day's pleasures, with a disturbed mind. There are so many living in this kind of suffering: resenting people, intoxicated and deluded. Can you live within this? If you can, then people will say "Yes! Of course!" and they will follow you and know that the Buddha's teaching is a huge, open-minded, spacious teaching and be able to believe in it.

If someone like you talks about Emptiness all the time and goes around talking about their deep Understanding and *satori*, this will come to nothing of value at all. To just think conceptually that you are pure is not real Emptiness. Along with all devils and evils and resentment and hate and insults--within all of these--can you jump in and live freely and easily? If you can then you can say that you understand Emptiness just a little. Being told this Shibodai Sonja was truly astonished. What was it that Vimalakirti was trying to say to him??

This is why Shibodai Sonja became full of fear, but Vimalakirti saw right through him. In this world, to be caught on something like these words of mine--where will that get you? You have to know that these words and this form of mine are all only apparitions. In this world all phenomena are phantasms which move and change in each instant--changing and moving and changing again. There is nothing which stays the same. From spring to summer the trees fill in with green leaves. When summer changes to autumn the leaves fall off. The small flowers by the edge of the road also dry up and blow away. The cells of our body are decaying every instant as well. Yesterday's body is not today's body. Mountains and rivers are also phantoms. There is nothing in the world that is not just a phantom. Therefore all that I am saying is also a phantom. It is just a sound, a vibration that is entering your ears. My teaching is an apparition. This is why wise people don't get attached to something they read printed in words.

Neither will they be attached to any of the teaching that is soaking through those written words. They won't be attached to words or letters or ideas or things. Therefore, for people who are wise there is nothing to fear. This is what is called Liberation or Rebirth. This is to truly understand Emptiness. To understand Emptiness is to understand that all phenomena, just as they are--all of them--are empty. All of the Ten Thousand Things, exactly as they are, are empty. This listening to this talk is Emptiness itself, and to actually know that is Rebirth, Liberation. Someone like you who negates everything and then says that is Emptiness is tied and bound by that idea of Emptiness and your attachment to it. In this way Vimalakirti taught Shibodai Sonja true Emptiness. At this time two hundred angels and two hundred young people's hearts were opened and with radiant eyes they could see everything in the world clearly and beautifully. They could see that everything in the whole world is empty. Their clear, transparent and bright eyes were opened.

"In this way I had a terribly difficult time with Vimalakirti and that's why I want you to excuse me from having to go see him." Saying this, the most eloquent of the Buddha's disciples, Shibodai Sonja, also turned down the Buddha's request to him to go and pay a visit to the sickbed of Vimalakirti.

