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*Living Skillfully: Buddhist Philosophy of Life from the  
Vimalakīrti Sūtra*

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# A Review of *Living Skillfully: Buddhist Philosophy of Life from the Vimalakīrti Sūtra*

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*Living Skillfully: Buddhist Philosophy of Life from the Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. By Dale S. Wright. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021, 176 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-758735-5 (hardback), \$29.95/ 978-0-19-758737-9 (e-book), \$19.99.

The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (hereafter *VS*) is one of the most important and influential texts in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Written in Sanskrit in India around the second century C.E., it was later translated into Chinese, Tibetan, and other languages. (There are six English translations.) The *VS* was especially significant in the development of the Chan and Zen traditions (for example, in the *Platform Sūtra*). A distinctive feature of the *VS*—and a crucial source of its appeal—is that its central figure, Vimalakīrti, is an enlightened layperson. He demonstrates to Śāriputra, Rāhula, and other monks from the early tradition the value for all persons of the “perfection of wisdom” approach advocated by the emerging Mahāyāna movement. In particular, he emphasizes the centrality of nondualism and the role of silence in Buddhist teaching.

Dale S. Wright says he wrote *Living Skillfully* as a “tribute to Vimalakīrti” (160) in response to his students’ desire for “a Buddhist philosophy

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of life that could be tested in their own lives here and now” (vii). Wright notes that they initially found the VS to be “incomprehensible and therefore uninspiring.” His aim here is “to get it into existential view” so it could be understood in relation to their actual lives (vii). The book is not a scholarly analysis of the sources, composition, reception, interpretation, or influence of the VS. Rather, it is an effort to develop a practical Buddhist philosophy of life for a broad contemporary audience through what he calls a “meditative dialogue” with the VS (9).<sup>2</sup> Wright is exceptionally well informed about traditional textual representations of Mahāyāna thought and practice, and he is deeply committed to their value. He has written an engaging guide to what following the Buddhist path could mean for ordinary people today.

In Wright’s account, Buddhism is primarily about how to respond in a healthy way to the inevitable dissatisfactions of human life. Drawing on the motif of the Buddha as a physician and the parable of the poison arrow (“Cūḷamālunkya Sutta,” *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 1.429), he argues that, though many difficulties are beyond our control, we can determine whether to respond to these difficulties in a healthy or unhealthy way. We respond properly by employing “therapeutic practices” that transform our destructive habits—the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion—into “skillful patterns of living” (2-3). Living skillfully, the topic of the second chapter of the VS, is the guiding theme of Wright’s account. He presupposes a modernist perspective by declaring that Buddhism does not “promise a heavenly afterlife in another world,” but is about the development of “skills to live successfully right where we are” (5). He regards neither rebirth governed by karma nor *nirvāṇa* that is the overcoming of the cycle of rebirth as essential to what is important in Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> Living healthily here and now is its central concern.

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<sup>2</sup> He mainly relies on the translation of Robert A. F. Thurman in *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti*.

<sup>3</sup> There are different forms of Buddhist modernism. One important form develops Buddhism in ways that are thought to render it compatible with the modern scientific

Wright acknowledges the magical elements in the *VS* and the presentation of the Buddha as a divine figure who employs miraculous powers. However, he insists that the Buddha is primarily a teacher and a guide rather than a savior and dispenser of grace. He attributes the magical and miraculous events in the *VS* to the skillful techniques of storytellers promoting the Buddha's message. From a Mahāyāna perspective, the primary message is that the Buddhist "path entails unselfish concern for others" (13). Hence, for Wright, we need to begin the path by generating *bodhicitta*, the thought of enlightenment, a source of direction and energy needed for the arduous journey ahead. In Wright's account, the Buddha inspires this in the *VS* by miraculously allowing his audience to see the world as he sees it. However, for college students today seeking a philosophy of life to confront their dissatisfactions, it may not be obvious that unselfish concern for others should be central to such a philosophy. Though *bodhicitta* is often regarded as the beginning of the bodhisattva path, it is already a considerable moral achievement, not easily attained by most people. Wright recognizes this (see 133-134), but he might have said more at the outset to show why the anxiety and despair of everyday life is rooted primarily in egoism and possessiveness, and hence is best addressed by committing ourselves to the well-being of all others. It may be that for most people, as a matter of the development of their moral psychology, pursuit of enlightenment for oneself is needed before it can be evident that concern for all beings should be the primary motivation.

A central reason Wright thinks the *VS* is a valuable source for a plausible philosophy of life for ordinary persons is that Vimalakīrti is an enlightened layperson rather than a monastic. He represents "a new Buddhist ideal—that of an ordinary citizen who is both fully enlightened and fully engaged in a vibrant and complex urban world" (23). In particular, he is a husband and a father who lives a worldly life, yet he does so in a

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outlook and free of supernatural elements. For earlier discussion of these issues, see Wright's account of a "naturalistic theory of karma" in "Critical Questions" and Wright, *What is Buddhist Enlightenment?*, ch. 4.

contemplative way usually associated with monastic life. Nonetheless, it should be noted that Vimalakīrti is hardly an ordinary person. He is a very wealthy businessman and property owner who is surrounded by servants. His enlightenment is evident because he is above desire and uses his wealth to help the poor. However, the *VS* does not tell us how he maintains his great wealth through his business in a way that is consistent with the Buddhist virtues of honesty, generosity, and compassion. Wright may be correct to praise Vimalakīrti for helping those in need, but he has little to say about how those committed to central Buddhist values would acquire such wealth or more generally how they would earn a living in the capitalist world many of us inhabit (right livelihood in the eightfold path). In any case, for persons struggling to keep a job and feed their children or living in a society in which they are oppressed, it is not obvious to what extent the very wealthy Vimalakīrti provides a helpful role model. Still, as presented in the *VS*, Vimalakīrti is obviously admirable in many ways. For example, as Wright emphasizes, he is a skillful teacher, “in solidarity with ordinary people,” and able to address their individual needs (25).

The heart of Wright’s discussion is an account of the six perfections (in chapters three to five).<sup>4</sup> These are central in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and for Wright, they are the primary therapeutic practices for overcoming self and self-interest, thereby transforming our unhealthy practices into healthy ones. Though the perfection of generosity begins with self-centered forms, he says, it aims for a generosity that is joyful, free, and natural, something that ultimately requires nonpossessiveness rooted in the realization of the nonduality of self and other. In his account of the perfection of morality, Wright emphasizes the danger of attachment to moral rules and the need for flexibility and judgment in applying them, as well as the importance of developing a selfless motivation rather than focusing on the karmic results of one’s actions. The last point is also true of the perfection of tolerance, Wright says, stressing that it is not passivity or indifference, but a moral response to dangers and injustices that

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed account of these, see Wright, *The Six Perfections*.

often inspire fear and anger. He observes that “human suffering is an inevitable factor in our lives” (51; see also 117-118), interpreting Buddhism not as teaching how to end suffering, but as showing how to respond to it in a healthy way. Later Wright says that we cannot eliminate aging, sickness, and death, but we can learn to experience them with equanimity by overcoming egoism and possessiveness through the awareness of nondualism (see 73-74). Moreover, he claims, the perfection of energetic effort implies an affirmation of our lives in this world and the belief that, despite the suffering, “life in the world is inherently good” (55), a more positive assessment of Buddhist outlook than some passages in the *VS* might suggest. In addition, according to Wright, although desire and emotion were viewed with suspicion in early Buddhism, in the *VS* forms of both desire and emotion are affirmed: love, compassion, awe, wonder, joy, laughter, and “a passionate, even erotic, striving” are all affirmed as part of the Buddhist path (57). In short, Wright interprets the first four perfections as requiring moral aspiration that is quite demanding and deeply passionate.

Wright devotes a chapter each to the perfections of meditation and wisdom. His account of meditation covers much familiar territory: breathing meditation, insight meditation, and forms of mindfulness meditation. In response to the contention of some meditation teachers that meditation and thinking are essentially different, Wright observes that “insight meditation begins in focused reflection on teachings about the three marks of existence,” even though the results of this “are not reducible to intellectual conclusions or conceptual outcomes” (65-66). He also says that, though some forms of mindfulness are nonjudgmental, “mindfulness of the dharma in everyday life” requires “mental discernment and judgment” (70-71). The most interesting part of the chapter is at the beginning. Noting that Vimalakīrti is portrayed as being engaged in a wide variety of activities in the world, Wright reasonably asks: “When does he meditate? How does he ever have time?” (60). His answer points to the most important lesson that might be drawn from the *VS*. He takes its “central theme” to be “an effort to make everyday life itself the venue for meditation practice” (60). As he notes, the idea that “meditation could be

extended to encompass everything we do” was very influential in Chan Buddhism (61). Of course, we might still wonder exactly what this would mean and how it would be possible. The *VS* has little to say about this, but there is much to be learned from later developments such as Dōgen’s discussions of how cleaning, cooking, and eating may be undertaken as important forms of Buddhist practice.<sup>5</sup>

The final perfection, wisdom, is crucial for the complete fulfillment of the first five. Wright emphasizes that wisdom means not only understanding reality, but also living in accord with it. That is, wisdom entails both understanding that all things are empty, lacking independent or inherent nature—in positive terms, are interdependent—and following the implications of this understanding by living without clinging or attachment, not even to the idea of emptiness. Though Wright is deeply sympathetic with the teaching of the *VS*, he sometimes raises objections to it. Here he contests its suggestion that the self is an illusion like water in a mirage. If so, why should we care about people as Buddhism plainly thinks we should? Wright correctly points out that the no-self teaching means that there is no self as something permanent and independent. However, there is a “self” that consists of the five *skandhas*, and this is the self for which we have compassion. Still, though this is familiar Buddhist teaching, it is also the feature of Buddhism that many people find especially difficult to accept. As Wright recognizes, wisdom requires intellectual as well as meditative understanding of emptiness and no-self. More could have been said to address the important intellectual perplexities these ideas raise for many people otherwise attracted to Buddhism.

The remaining chapters focus on several themes Wright thinks are especially important in the *VS*. One of them is skill-in-means (*upāya*), which he understands as “the capacity to bring insight about the empty

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<sup>5</sup> See various fascicles on these topics in Dōgen, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* and Dōgen, “Instructions.” Though Dōgen wrote primarily for monastics and thought zazen was very important, these works suggest ways in which ordinary human activities may be engaged in as forms of meditative practice.



nature of reality to bear on everyday life situations under the influence of a wide range of circumstances” (95). Vimalakīrti is interpreted as an ideal model for employing skill-in-means in this sense. He is especially good at teaching the *Dharma* to a diverse group of ordinary people. For example, he saw in the crafts of persons such as a baker and a carpenter the ingredients of character needed by a bodhisattva. Considering the *VS* as a whole, Wright identifies five important tools of skill-in-means that the master craftsman—and the bodhisattva—would need: humility or selflessness as an uninflated sense of self; facing risk with courage and wisdom; equanimity (balance and integrity); learning through mindfulness; and flexibility and improvisation (see 108-111).

In his discussion of skill-in-means, Wright contrasts “personal freedom” with “predispositions, ingrained habits, and well-ensconced compulsions” (102). The latter three are what we start out with: reactive patterns stored in old habits whose motives are beneath our conscious awareness. By contrast, the former is the result of the conscious intention of *bodhicitta* and the resulting cultivation of character. However, though Buddhist practice surely is about overcoming bad habits, there is a respect in which Wright’s contrast could be misleading. This is because, arguably, Buddhist practice is substantially about the development of good habits, a process of rehabilitation. Much of Wright’s account acknowledges this. For example, in the discussion of the craftsman, he speaks of “repetitive learning” and “disciplined practice” in the development of skills (108), the language of habit formation. Buddhist enlightenment does imply being fully aware and responding flexibly to everchanging circumstances. But the capacity to do this is itself a habit. It may be regarded as a kind of freedom, not because it is not habit, but because it is a habit that we have fully endorsed and cultivated as good.

Wright takes the appearance of the goddess in the seventh chapter of the *VS* to be another exploration of Buddhist freedom, both in the sense of not being attached to inflexible rules and not being attached to gender as a fixed and independent essence. When Śāriputra challenges the idea

that a woman could be enlightened, the goddess responds by magically changing him into the form of a woman and herself into the form of a man, thus affirming that male and female are culturally contingent categories, not fixed essences. According to Wright, “the goddess’s transgender fluidity helps Śāriputra to empty his mind of rigid ideas about gender identity” (122). He takes this application of emptiness to gender to be an innovation of the *VS*. In this way, it is a model of diversity, of taking the *Dharma* in new directions. However, he thinks it would have been more innovative if it had envisioned not just that a female deity, but a female human being could be a bodhisattva. Nonetheless, he thinks the *VS* is a valuable resource for a more liberated discussion of the *Dharma* and gender in the contemporary world. The goddess is a model for challenging contemporary patriarchal gender constraints.

One of the most important and influential chapters of the *VS* focuses on nonduality. The nonduality between self and other is central. Realizing this is essential to overcoming possessiveness. Wright also draws attention to the text’s emphasis on the nonduality of purity and nonpurity, a point those on the bodhisattva path should keep in view. In addition, going beyond the text, he suggests that for people today the nonduality between the human and the nonhuman natural world is crucial to recognize (various examples concerning environmental issues are given). Of course, Wright recognizes that the *VS* is a polemical text arguing for the superiority of Mahāyāna over “Hīnayāna” Buddhism—and that at the end it assertively promotes its own value. Though the Mahāyāna claims to be comprehensive, Wright says, there is a danger that it can “become just another divisive category” (144). The logic of nondualism, he argues, should lead to greater inclusivity. At the same time, he says, reconciling dualities does not mean eliminating them: “All of these differences still stand. Non-dualism is not monism” (145). True enough. However, negotiating the ways in which distinctions do and do not matter is a challenging philosophical and practical issue in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and observing that Vimalakīrti is portrayed as being skilled in doing this does not take us far in resolving this issue.

The nonduality chapter largely consists of accounts of it by thirty-two bodhisattvas. Mañjuśrī, the final bodhisattva, says that the others all spoke well, but their accounts were implicitly dualistic. It would be better, he claims, to say nothing at all. And indeed, when he asks Vimalakīrti to give his own account, Vimalakīrti responds, famously, by remaining silent. Mañjuśrī portrays his silence as excellent, the true entrance into nonduality. The idea that silence is the ultimate expression of the *Dharma* certainly has been influential in Mahāyāna Buddhism, for example, in Chan and Zen. However, as Wright notes, context is very important: Earlier in the *VS*, Śāriputra's silence was a sign of failure, and after all, Vimalakīrti's silence is depicted in language: "Silence couldn't fulfill its liberating function unless it made its appearance within the language of awakening" (150). Affirming that silence is the supreme articulation of the *Dharma* is a way of indicating the limitations of language in explaining the central ideas of emptiness, interdependence, and nondualism, but the meaning of this can be grasped only after we have struggled with these limitations. The importance of silence in Vimalakīrti's and other expressions of Buddhist teaching might seem rather esoteric or mysterious. However, there are many ordinary situations in which silence can have great communicative significance, where this is determined by who is participating in the conversation, what has already been said, expectations about what might or should be said, and the like. Wright nicely explains why we should resist "the dualistic separation of language and silence" (150).

Wright's aim is to provide a Buddhist philosophy of life for people living today by exploring central themes in the *VS*. In many respects, he succeeds admirably. *Living Skillfully* is clearly and cogently written, deeply informed by knowledge of Buddhist thought and practice, and animated by sincere commitment to the value of these. In a variety of ways, he shows us the importance of the *VS* for the contemporary world. Nonetheless, there is a central issue that is raised by the *VS*, but not really explored by it—and is not sufficiently engaged in Wright's text either. The Buddha left his wife and son to seek enlightenment, and he did not return home

after he found it. He said that the “household life is crowded and dusty,” making it difficult “to lead the holy life” (“Kandaraka Sutta,” *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, 1.344). The VS challenges this by portraying Vimalakīrti as a layperson, a husband, and a father, who is nonetheless enlightened. However, for many people, household life is full of demands, complexities, ambiguities, uncertainties, and distractions as they strive to care for their loved ones in a very difficult world. What could it mean to live in a household as a Buddhist, for example, when one is a spouse and parent, in such circumstances? The VS proposes that we follow the bodhi-sattva path, pursuing the six perfections, striving to live nonpossessively. In endeavoring to do this, one concern is that, whether on account of nature or culture or both, raising young children or caring for elderly parents typically involves considerable attachment and selective altruism. In some respects, attending to and providing for persons we love is one of the most important ways in which human beings are possessive. Deep partiality, drawing a sharp distinction between one’s family and all others, is at the heart of many people’s family lives. Wright seems to recognize this: “It is crucial to treat intimates in our own life very differently from the ways we treat everyone else” (144-145). In view of this, though, what does it mean to pursue the universal and impartial Buddhist values of compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity? Would this pursuit radically transform family life?<sup>6</sup> It is not clear how Wright would answer these questions. He says that “love and compassion extended out to people we don’t know will often best take the form of justice, tolerance, and intercultural sensitivity” (145). Such a division, between intimates and others, is certainly a possible approach to these questions. However, it would have been helpful to see more development of what exactly this division could mean for people in the world today committed to pursuing the six perfections. Nonetheless, on the whole, Wright’s book is a very welcome contribution to contemporary Buddhist philosophical thought.

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<sup>6</sup> For two discussions of these issues, see McRae, “Equanimity and Intimacy” and Siderits, *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy*, 131-136.

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