

TRANSCENDENT ACTION AT A DISTANCE - ANNOTATED

A Neo-Buddhist Sci-Fi Fantasy Superhero Mashup To Chase Away The Blues

By Ben Alterman, Inspired from numerous canonical sources and far-out imaginings¹

Once upon a time, two great spiritual heroes, Vimala and Manju, were discussing Inconceivable Liberation on live-stream while a multitude listened-in with rapt attention. Shari, an elder follower of Tama, Earth's far-seeing spiritual guide, was among those listening and thought to themselves, "I'm not entirely sure that this is being recorded. With afternoon fast approaching, if the nuns and monks in this time zone don't eat soon, we won't have another chance before tomorrow."²

Vimala, ever mindful and wonderfully generous, had already arranged with Door Dash for a surprise meal to be delivered to everyone who had registered. Moreover, he planned to provide the dessert himself, a dessert such as none had ever tasted which would satisfy the hunger of all, whether or not they had registered. To that end Vimala sent an emanation of himself to a galaxy billions of light years from Earth. Through quantum entanglement, Vimala's emanation instantly appeared on a planet in that distant galaxy where the beings, called "Sattvas," had been evolving over vast eons.³

None of the highly evolved beings on that planet any longer experienced a reality encumbered by suffering. Unsatisfactoriness for the Sattvas was seen as an opportunity for growth rather than as a hindrance. In their world "evil" no longer existed. Struggle was confined to meeting and transcending the natural challenges of existence. Where progress was possible, earnest efforts were made. Where the inevitable had already been determined, adaptive acceptance was adopted and glum resignation shunned. Hypocrisy and lies were unknown since there was no longer any motivation to deceive oneself or others. Crime and violence were unknown since there was no longer any greed or malevolence. There was no need for forbearance since they possessed unshakable patience founded on comprehensive understanding free of conditioned reactivity. They were never depressed since their calling to further development was an ever present imperative for them and they had no anxiety since they were fearlessly committed to following their path, even at the cost of their lives. Regret and sorrow did not exist since any prior change

¹ This story is a "Mashup" of chapters from the Vimalakirti Sutra sprinkled with passages inspired from other sources which will be detailed below.

² Canonical names of characters in this story have been shortened as follows: Manju for Manjushri (the Bodhisattva personifying wisdom), Shari for Shariputra (a chief disciple of the historical Buddha), Tama for Gotama Buddha (the historical Buddha) and, of course, Vimala for Vimalakirti, the protagonist of his eponymous sutra where he is portrayed as a layman with unsurpassed wisdom in the era of Gotama Buddha. Other shortened names will be referenced as they occur. Note - Shari is referred to with a non-binary pronoun since at one point in the sutra, a goddess temporarily changes Shariputra's gender to female.

³ In the sutra, Vimalakirti instantaneously sends an emanation to bring back food from a far distant world inhabited by Bodhisattvas, here referred to as "Sattvas."

would have resulted in a world different from the one in which they were living with immeasurable gratitude.⁴

The Sattvas possessed such concentration that they could focus their attention indefinitely on any object of the senses or of the mind with vivid equipoise free of the slightest dullness or agitation. Thus, they experienced physical and mental pliancy wherever their intelligence might be engaged.⁵ Having dispensed with all illusory perceptions and having resolved all conflicting conceptualizations with direct knowledge and deep understanding, they were entirely free of confusion and were, thus, never distracted by unwelcome thoughts or the conflictual feelings that accompany them. They had attained unity of mind and spirit that allowed them to entertain discursive thinking only when they needed it, while at other times they were able to equanimously settle their minds wherever they wished, most often in blissful, empty clarity.⁶ So far had they evolved that the Sattvas no longer had need for such an imprecise, confusing and illusory means of communication as words or even concepts. Their far-seeing spiritual guide, “Treya,”⁷ communicated with them through pheromones with fragrances that masterfully led them toward ever greater fulfillment.⁸ When Vimala's emanation suddenly appeared to the Sattvas, they were astonished, so Treya translated into fragrances Vimala's explanation of why he had come, beginning with a description of the people on Earth.

“I come from a world called Earth,” he related, “where most beings cling to an illusory identity they have designated with thoughts of ‘I am (this and that).’ Then they become attached to objects with thoughts such as ‘(This is) mine,’ and ‘I want (that).’ Like the orbit of planets determined by prior causes and current conditions, they revolve without agency around their star of illusory identity and desires.⁹ Yet, there are also spiritual sojourners on Earth who engage these suffering beings with compassionate wisdom keyed to each individual’s potential.

“To aide those suffering beings without resources or virtue, these spiritual sojourners compassionately seek to provide resources and the means for personal development. To aide those with resources and virtue, these spiritual sojourners compassionately seek to help them understand Truths with which they can transcend the sufferings inevitably encountered while striving for a happy life. To aide those who have realized transcendent wisdom, these spiritual

⁴ In this paragraph, modern psychological constructs inspired by Dharma teachings have been employed to describe the Sattvas.

⁵ This description of the Sattvas’ concentration is derived from abhidharma shamatha teachings.

⁶ The “unity of mind” described here is inspired by discourses on samadhi in suttas of the Pali canon. In Buddhist tantric practice, empty clarity (aka “bliss and voidness”) are attributes of Awakened awareness.

⁷ “Treya” refers to Maitreya Buddha. The conversation between Gotama Buddha and Maitreya near the end of the sutra was one of the inspirations for making this short story public.

⁸ In the sutra, fragrances rather than words are employed to spiritually guide the Bodhisattvas on the distant world to which Vimalakirti’s emanation was sent to obtain food.

⁹ These lines are an “updated” paraphrasing of opening verses from Madhyamakavatara.

sojourners join with them on the path to fulfillment while compassionately helping those in need.¹⁰

“In our world so widely burning with malevolence, happily, these spiritual sojourners live without an inclination toward anger. In our world so often driven by greed, happily, these spiritual sojourners live without desire for anything they cannot have or would be better off without. In our world benighted with the ignorance of being misinformed, misguided and simply not knowing any better, happily, these spiritual sojourners live in the light of wisdom that illuminates far more than superficial appearances.¹¹ Rather than just viewing the designated identity of people and other things, instead they insightfully view the causes, conditions, parts, and sequences of phenomena. Their engaged, compassionate wisdom transcends the swamp of depression while their fearless allegiance to Truth transcends anxiety and confusion concerning the fundamental split between real and ideal. Amid the myriad distractions of our world, these spiritual sojourners focus with ever increasing concentration and insight on integrating every experience with compassionate wisdom.”

Vimala concluded this description with a request, “Would you, oh admirable Sattvas, provide a dessert for me to bring back to Earth in order to inspire the spiritual sojourners there?” In response to Vimala’s request, the Sattvas expressed, through Treya, their profound admiration for the spiritual sojourners of Earth who they viewed as nothing short of heroes. No opportunity for such spiritual heroism still existed on their planet. From the point of view of the Sattvas, the spiritual sojourners of Earth were graced with a precious opportunity lacking on their own world; that is, the heroic challenge of not succumbing to the mania of idealism and the despair of nihilism nor of being overwhelmed by anxiety, depression, or cynicism while compassionately and equanimously engaging with beings who suffer from greed, malevolence, and ignorance. With the dark suffering so prevalent on Earth lacking on their planet, the Sattvas had no opportunity to develop extraordinary compassion, and since compassion is the seed that motivates spiritual development, the water that nourishes it, and the fruit long enjoyed on the path to fulfillment,¹² the Sattvas had not yet reached fulfillment of their evolutionary journey for that very reason. Thus, they were grateful for the opportunity to exercise their compassion by providing a fragrantly inspiring dessert for the spiritual sojourners of Earth.

When Vimala's emanation returned to Earth with dessert for those who were listening to the streaming discourse on Inconceivable Liberation, he distributed it with a vast fleet of drones to all those who were tuned-in. Surprisingly, this dessert had the unique effect of giving everyone whatever they were looking for. For instance, those who were looking for something sweet experienced the sweetness of the dessert and those who were looking for something savory experienced its savoriness. Moreover, for those who were deeply versed in spiritual teachings

¹⁰ This paragraph was inspired by Je Tsongkapa’s Lam Rim teaching on the three levels of spiritual aspiration, here reimagined as a “needs hierarchy” such as those expounded in social psychology.

¹¹ These lines were derived from verses of the Dhammapada.

¹² This poetic homage to compassion is again paraphrased from the opening verses of Madhyamakavatara.

and practice, the dessert's fragrance triggered a remembrance of things past, a great upwelling of all the teachings and insights they ever had, now fully integrated in their intellect and in their orientation toward everyday life.¹³ On the other hand, those who had tuned into the live-stream in order to troll it and to look for the nonsense rather than the sense of what they were hearing were incapable of smelling the fragrance of the dessert and uninterested in eating it.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the seed of an acquired taste for spiritual aspiration had been planted in their minds, and so everyone got their “just deserts” or better,¹⁵ just as the Sattvas had intended.

Meanwhile, Tama was working remotely with followers when his assistant, Anan,¹⁶ noticed other-worldly fragrances wafting over their studio from miles away. "Wow - what on earth are those fragrances, so redolent with compassionate wisdom and transcendence?" he asked. Tama, whose mind was entangled with Vimala's and Treya's replied as follows. "Those fragrances have been sent from highly evolved beings on a far distant world to inspire the spiritual sojourners here. Anan, even though it may seem, by comparison, that the suffering people of Earth are helplessly mired as a species in a juvenile stage of evolution, do not be discouraged. The spiritual sojourners of Earth have a wonderful opportunity no longer available to the beings on that enlightened world approaching utopia, namely, the freedom to shine with compassionate wisdom as a beacon of light in the darkness here. Every moment, regardless of how dire or hopeful the conditions may seem, is an opportunity for Awakened presence with compassionate engagement guided by wisdom on our boundless path."

Treya was listening and affirmed "Just so!" while Vimala, who was also listening, remained silent¹⁷ in appreciation and assent. Anan asked, "What, master, should this story be called?"¹⁸ Tama answered, "Albert Einstein, a scientist of unsurpassed gravitas, quipped that quantum entanglement seemed like 'spooky action at a distance,'¹⁹ so this narrative may be called 'Transcendent Action at a Distance.' Alternatively, it may be referred to as 'A Neo-Buddhist Sci-Fi Fantasy Superhero Mashup To Chase Away The Blues'."

¹³ This homage to Marcel Proust is here reimagined as a satori-like experience.

¹⁴ This passage was inspired by an apocryphal story of Shantideva's exposition of his Bodhisattvacharyavatara to the monastic scholars of Nalanda, some of whom were trolling him.

¹⁵ This phrasing was inspired by Hamlet's discussion with Polonius about how best to treat a visiting troupe of actors, although the Sattva's motivation for giving "better than deserved" is doubtless more noble than what was subsequently expressed by Hamlet in his eponymous play.

¹⁶ "Anan" refers to Ananda, the historical Buddha's venerable attendant.

¹⁷ This is an homage to Vimalakirti's famous silence at the conclusion of a discussion of non-duality by the assembled bodhisattvas in the sutra. Also, silence is typically taken as assent.

¹⁸ Many sutras end with Ananda asking the Buddha what the teaching should be called.

¹⁹ Einstein was renowned for his seminal theories of gravity, but could not accept quantum entanglement as a real phenomenon even though admitting that the math of quantum mechanics correctly entails it.

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