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The Image of 'Sick Vimalakirti' in Song Poetry

There is a story in the Vimalakirti Sutra (维摩诘所说经) is that Vimalakirti was not ill and deliberately pretended to be sick. The Buddha sent Manjusri to visit Vimalakirti. Vimalakirti took the opportunity to debate Dharma with Manjushri. Vimalakirti used all kinds of metaphors to describe the nature of our body which is "impermanent" (无常) and constantly changing and will eventually die and disappear. We will be tortured by various internal pains and mental troubles. It is a state of "selflessness" (无我) and changes with the fate. It is "empty" (空), because the body is not real, so the body is empty. Buddhism engages in the analysis of the body with a detached perspective, so the pain is not terrible. It is part of our life process. If people can realize the essence of life, they can be free from all kinds of ailments.

The image of the sick Vimalakirti was accepted by the literati in Song Dynasty and integrated into the poetry creation. Literati in Song Dynasty often used the allusion of Vimalakirti's illness when recording their illness or their friends' illnesses. They use metaphors to regard themselves and others as sick Vimalakirti. This literary phenomenon usually has three characteristics: First, They used the image of Vimalakirti to display kindness and concern for the patients. Second, they accepted and appreciated the image of the sick Vimalakirti. and they used the image of sick Vimalakirti to surpass the pain caused by illness in their lives. Third, it emphasizes that Vimalakirti has the characteristics of being ill and healed together with all beings. The image of sick Vimalakirti is used to express the personal ideals of Song Dynasty literati who worry about all beings and enjoy the happiness of all beings.