

Arrogance vs. Faith in Lotus Sutra Chapter 2

The Buddha's "Inconceivable" Teaching and Context in Chapter 2

In Chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sutra* ("Expedient Means"), Shakyamuni Buddha begins to reveal a profound truth that he calls "wonderful and inconceivable." The setting is dramatic: the Buddha has entered a deep meditation, and upon arising from it, he contemplates sharing the ultimate Dharma (law) that can lead all beings to enlightenment. However, he hesitates because not everyone is ready to accept such a teaching. In fact, as the Buddha prepares to teach, **five thousand members** of the assembly – monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen – stand up and depart. The sutra describes these individuals as *arrogant* or "overbearingly proud," believing they understood the Buddha's teachings fully when they did not^[1]. The Buddha does not stop them from leaving. Instead, he observes that this departure has removed the "chaff" from the assembly, leaving only the sincere seekers behind^{[2][3]}. This context frames the meaning of his words: **"My teaching is wonderful and inconceivable. If arrogant people hear me, they will not respect or believe me."** In other words, the most profound Dharma can only benefit those who approach it with humility and open-minded faith; those blinded by arrogance will simply walk away or scoff, as exemplified by the 5,000 who left.

Arrogance as a Barrier to Understanding the Dharma

In Buddhism, arrogance (or pride) is considered a serious obstacle to spiritual growth. Arrogance in this context means an inflated self-regard – being so proud or self-satisfied that one is closed off to new insights. The *Lotus Sutra* narrates that the 5,000 people left because they were *"too proud, too self-satisfied"* to continue listening to the Buddha's sermon^[4]. They mistakenly believed they had "attained what they had not attained" – in other words, they thought they already understood everything worth knowing^[1]. Because of this conceit, they **"felt that they no longer needed to listen to Shakyamuni's sermon"** and thus deprived themselves of the Buddha's highest teaching^[5].

Commentators have noted that people of great pride often *"do not see their own mistakes"* and are quick to find fault in others while blind to their own faults^[6]. Such an attitude makes it nearly impossible to learn anything new or to truly hear the Dharma. The *Lotus Sutra* describes those who left as people of "little wisdom" whose lack of humility rendered them *"incapable of accepting this Dharma"*^{[7][8]}. In short, arrogance "blocks our ability to hear the Buddha," as it closes our minds and hearts. Just as a cup that is already full cannot receive more water, a mind puffed up with arrogance cannot absorb the Buddha's *"inconceivable"* teachings.

Importantly, the Buddha's reluctance to preach openly at first was not because the Dharma lacks compassion, but because he knew that preaching a profound truth to unreceptive, arrogant people could cause them to slander it and thereby incur negative consequences for themselves. In the narrative, the Buddha initially says *"No, no, I will not say any more"* when pressed to teach, precisely out of concern that the proud would only react with disrespect[9]. This highlights a key Buddhist principle: **the Dharma should be shared with wisdom, taking into account the audience's capacity**. Expounding a deep teaching to those filled with scorn could do more harm than good – not because the teaching is flawed, but because the listeners' arrogance might lead them to reject it and slander the truth, worsening their own karmic condition. In fact, the *Lotus Sutra* (in Chapter 3, "Simile and Parable") advises teaching the Lotus Dharma *"among the wise but not among the foolish"*, implying one should discern the audience's attitude[10]. Those five thousand who left were described by the Buddha as *"branches and leaves"* (impediments) falling away, so that the *"trunks"* – the sincere seekers with humility – remained to receive the teaching[11].

Faith and Respect: Opening the Heart to the Buddha's Message

If arrogance is the closed door, **faith and respect** are the open gateway to enlightenment. In Buddhism, *faith* (*śraddhā*) does not mean unthinking, blind belief. Rather, it is a trust in the Buddha's wisdom cultivated through study, reflection, and experience. One modern Buddhist teacher emphasizes that *"faith in Nichiren Buddhism is not blind belief or superstition. It means being able to accept the teaching based on reason, and to experience and demonstrate its truth amid the realities of daily living."*[12] In other words, genuine faith is both rational and experiential – we ask questions and seek understanding, but we also have confidence in the Buddha's insight even when it exceeds our current understanding. The Buddha actually encouraged intelligent inquiry (as seen in the famous *Kalama Sutta* and other teachings), so long as it's done with a sincere desire to understand, not with cynicism. Thus, having faith does not mean we never question; it means we approach our questions with the **assumption of the Buddha's reliability**, giving his teachings the benefit of the doubt while we seek to verify them in practice. In the context of the *Lotus Sutra*, faith means trusting that this "wonderful and inconceivable" teaching really does lead to enlightenment, even if it initially boggles the mind.

Likewise, *respect* in Buddhism is not blind obedience to authority, but an attitude of humility and appreciation. To **"respect the Buddha"** means to recognize the immense compassion and wisdom behind the Buddha's words, and to refrain from dismissing them arrogantly. The verses in Chapter 2 contrast the arrogant who "will not respect or believe" the Buddha, with the implied attitude of those who do *"respect and believe."* Respecting the teaching means we *value* it highly; we are willing to give it careful

attention and consideration. A respectful mind remains open and appreciative, rather than cynical or scornful. This openness “opens our hearts to [the Buddha’s] enlightenment,” allowing us to benefit from the Dharma.

A beautiful illustration of **respect and faith** in the *Lotus Sutra* is the story of **Bodhisattva Never Disparaging** (introduced later in Chapter 20). This bodhisattva’s practice was simply to bow to every person he met and say: “*I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance. Why? Because you will all practice the bodhisattva way and will then be able to attain Buddhahood.*”^[13] Many people he approached were annoyed or angered by his message; notably, the sutra says he was “*baselessly criticized and attacked by arrogant people*”. Yet, true to his name, Never Disparaging **never responded with disrespect or contempt**^[14]. He embodied an unshakeable faith in others’ Buddha-nature and a deep respect for everyone, even those who mistreated him. In the end, the sutra teaches that those who once attacked him later realized their error, accepted the Lotus teaching, and Bodhisattva Never Disparaging himself eventually attained Buddhahood. This story highlights that an attitude of respect and humility (the opposite of arrogance) is central to practicing the Lotus Sutra. Nichiren, the 13th-century Japanese Buddhist reformer, said that Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s behavior demonstrates “*the heart of the practice of the Lotus Sutra*” – showing that **respect for others and faith in their potential is at the core of the sutra’s message**^{[15][16]}.

In summary, while arrogance closes one off from the Dharma, **faith and respect keep one’s mind open and receptive**. A person with faith doesn’t assume they already know everything; they are willing to listen deeply. A person with respect doesn’t scorn teachings that are hard to understand; they humbly recognize that the limitation might lie in their own understanding, not in the Dharma. Thus, they “*open their hearts*” and eventually can “take the Buddha’s enlightenment as their own.”

Nichiren’s Warnings: Arrogance as One of the “Fourteen Slanders”

Nichiren Daishonin – who ardently championed the *Lotus Sutra* in the 13th century – spoke extensively about the attitudes that hinder one’s practice of the Lotus. He famously enumerated **Fourteen Slanders** (or “fourteen evil causes”) that believers must guard against. At the top of this list is **arrogance**. In a letter titled “The Fourteen Slanders,” Nichiren cites an earlier commentary and lists the fourteen harmful attitudes or actions as follows: “(1) *arrogance*, (2) *negligence*, (3) *wrong views of the self*, (4) *shallow understanding*, (5) *attachment to earthly desires*, (6) *not understanding (the Buddha’s teachings)*, (7) *not believing*, (8) *scowling with knitted brows (i.e. harboring ill will when hearing the Dharma)*, (9) *harboring doubts*, (10) *slandering (the True Law)*, (11) *despising*, (12) *hating*, (13) *envying*, and (14) *bearing grudges.*”^[17] Each of these

is considered a *slander* of the Lotus Sutra in the sense that it “acts against the intent of the sutra” and prevents one from obtaining the full benefit of the Buddha’s teaching[18][19]. The spirit of this list is that **the way we approach the Law and fellow practitioners profoundly affects our ability to realize enlightenment**. Arrogance is listed first because, indeed, looking down on the Buddha’s Law or assuming one knows better than the Buddha is the starting point of many other errors. Nichiren comments that these fourteen slanders apply equally to laity and monks, and exhorts that one “*must be on guard against them.*”[20]

It’s worth noting that in Nichiren’s view, slander isn’t only about overtly defaming the sutra; it can also be subtle inner attitudes. For example, **arrogance** in this context means “*to have a haughty attitude toward true Buddhism and to hold it in disdain*”[21]. Even a person who nominally practices Buddhism could fall into this, for instance by thinking, “I already know this, I don’t need to chant or study earnestly,” or by practicing begrudgingly without sincerity. Nichiren warns that even if one is outwardly performing Buddhist practice (such as chanting the *Lotus Sutra*’s title, *Daimoku*), if one harbors any of these negative attitudes, it diminishes or nullifies the benefit of the practice[22][23]. In fact, he says the only difference between a Buddha and an ordinary person chanting *Odaimoku* is whether they **avoid** actions that go against the sutra’s intent[23]. Arrogance, being one of those actions, is like a poison that can ruin one’s spiritual efforts from within.

Nichiren also identified arrogance as a source of conflict and persecution in the spread of the *Lotus Sutra*. He frequently cited the *Lotus Sutra*’s prediction of “**three powerful enemies**” who would harass and oppose those who uphold the sutra in the evil age after the Buddha’s passing. These three are: **arrogant lay people, arrogant priests, and arrogant false sages**[24]. In essence, those filled with arrogance – whether ordinary believers or high-ranking religious leaders – are prone to reject or attack the true teaching out of ego. Nichiren saw this prophecy manifest in his own life, as he faced harsh criticism and persecution from Buddhist authorities of his day who refused to accept the *Lotus Sutra*’s supreme position. He characterized some of his persecutors (like certain influential priests) as “*extremely arrogant false sages,*” people who seemed wise or holy but whose pride led them to slander the very Law they should uphold[25]. Thus, from Nichiren’s perspective, **arrogance is not only a personal hindrance but a social evil** – it leads people to disparage correct Dharma and persecute its votaries, creating suffering for both themselves and others.

By contrast, Nichiren taught that practitioners should cultivate the opposite spirit: humility, gratitude, and compassion. He often quoted the example of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging (mentioned above) to emphasize respecting others’ Buddha-nature instead of holding oneself superior[26][16]. In one writing, Nichiren states, “*The heart of the Buddha’s lifetime of teachings is the Lotus Sutra, and the heart of the practice of the*

Lotus Sutra is found in the 'Never Disparaging' chapter."[15] This underscores that **the attitude of respect – never disdaining others or the Dharma – is central to the Lotus Sutra's practice**. All believers in the Lotus Sutra, Nichiren says, "*should absolutely be the last to abuse one another*", since to slight a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra is to slight the Buddha's own children[27][28]. In Nichiren's eyes, **arrogance and contempt have no place among true practitioners**; instead, unity and mutual respect in light of the Buddha-nature is the ideal.

Opening Our Hearts to the Inconceivable Dharma

The lesson from this passage of the *Lotus Sutra* and its commentaries is clear and timeless: to receive the full benefit of Buddhism's deepest teachings, we must approach them with humility, respect, and faith, rather than arrogance or cynicism. The Buddha's "*wonderful and inconceivable*" teaching – the one Buddha Vehicle that leads all to enlightenment – cannot be grasped by the prideful mind that thinks it has nothing left to learn. Arrogance causes people to "*not respect or believe*" the Buddha, thereby severing their connection to the very wisdom that could liberate them. In contrast, a spirit of **faith** (grounded in reason and earnest seeking) and **respect** (grounded in recognition of the Buddha's greatness and all beings' potential) keeps us receptive. It "**opens our hearts**" to the Buddha's enlightenment, allowing that light to illuminate our lives.

In practical terms, this means as Buddhist practitioners we are encouraged to continually check our attitude. Do we study with an open mind, or do we inwardly think "I already know this" or "this doesn't apply to me"? When teachings seem difficult or "inconceivable," do we make the arrogant assumption that the teaching must be wrong – or do we humbly consider that the Buddha might be pointing to something beyond our present understanding? As one commentary notes, even people who have embraced true Buddhism must be vigilant, because "*our arrogance may cause us to lose sight of maintaining a sincere attitude in faith*"[29]. If unchecked, pride can derail one's practice – one may even abandon one's faith and "*descend into the evil paths*," according to Nichiren's warning[29]. Conversely, maintaining a sincere, seeking spirit yields great benefit. The *Lotus Sutra* promises that those who "**rejoice with even a single verse**" of its teaching or who have even a spark of faith will ultimately attain Buddhahood[30]. The Buddha's enlightenment is made accessible to all, but it must be met with a willing heart.

In summary, the Buddha's words to Śāriputra are a reminder that the Dharma, however profound, cannot compel an unreceptive mind. Each individual must willingly "open" themselves to it. **Arrogance closes the door, but faith and respect open it**. The Buddha's *inconceivably* wonderful teaching is there for us – in the *Lotus Sutra* and in our daily practice – but it's effective only to the extent that we can lay aside ego and

embrace it with humility. As practitioners of the Lotus Sutra (or any spiritual path), we strive to emulate the wise members of the assembly who remained with Śāriputra: those who, with **open hearts**, stayed to listen deeply to the Buddha's message, and thereby set out on the path to enlightenment. By guarding ourselves against arrogance and fostering sincere faith and respect, we ensure that we, too, can hear, believe, and benefit from the Buddha's wonderful teaching.

Sources:

- *The Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 2 "Expedient Means" – various translations and commentaries. (See City of Ten Thousand Buddhas edition [4][6] and Wisdomlib translation [31][7] for descriptions of the 5,000 arrogant people leaving the assembly.)
- Nichiren Daishonin, "**The Fourteen Slanders**" (WND-1, p.756), which cites Miao-lo's list of fourteen slanderous attitudes to avoid[17][19].
- Nichiren Daishonin, "**The Opening of the Eyes**" and other writings – on the three arrogant types of enemies of the Lotus Sutra[24] and the example of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's practice of respect[15][14].
- Daisaku Ikeda, *The Wisdom for Creating Happiness and Peace*, vol. 3 – on faith in Buddhism not being blind belief but rooted in reason and experience[12].
- *Admonition Against Arrogance* (Myōgyōji Temple lecture, 2017) – on the 5,000 who "arrogantly believed they had attained what they had not" and the importance of maintaining humility in faith[1][29].
- **Buddhist Dictionary (Nichiren Library)** – definition of "five thousand arrogant persons" and discussion of arrogance in the Lotus Sutra context[1][32].
- *The Sūtra of Innumerable Meanings* (opening sutra to the Lotus) and other texts for the concept that the Buddha's true teaching is "difficult to believe and difficult to understand," requiring an attitude free of arrogance.

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