

# The Paradox of Redemption: Devadatta's Buddhahood in Nichiren's Philosophy and the Lotus Sutra

## 1. Introduction: The Paradox of Devadatta's Enlightenment

This report delves into one of the most profound and seemingly contradictory teachings within Buddhist thought: the assurance of Buddhahood for Devadatta, the cousin and notorious adversary of Shakyamuni Buddha. This concept, deemed "inexplicable yet precious" by Nichiren in his *Treatise on Prayers* (Kitō-shō), challenges conventional understandings of karma, retribution, and the very nature of enlightenment. The user's inquiry highlights the transformative power of this teaching, suggesting that if Devadatta, the archetypal evil person, can attain Buddhahood, then all those influenced by him can also escape the torment of the Hell of Incessant Suffering through the "great favor of the Lotus Sutra."

### 1.1. Devadatta: The Archetypal Adversary

Devadatta holds a unique and profoundly contradictory position in Buddhist narratives. He was a cousin of Shakyamuni Buddha, and also his brother-in-law through his sister Yasodhara, who was the Buddha's wife.<sup>1</sup> In the early stages of the Buddha's ministry, Devadatta entered the monastic order alongside other Sakyan princes, including Ananda.<sup>1</sup> Accounts indicate that he initially possessed grace and psychic powers, though he did not attain any stage of sainthood.<sup>1</sup>

However, Devadatta's character underwent a significant transformation. He became consumed by conceit, a desire for worldly gain and fame, and growing jealousy towards the Buddha.<sup>1</sup> This internal shift led him to attempt to usurp the Buddha's leadership of the Sangha, a request that was firmly rejected due to his unworthiness.<sup>1</sup> This rejection ignited a deep-seated anger and a vow for revenge, marking his

descent into overt antagonism.<sup>1</sup> His subsequent actions, including multiple attempts on the Buddha's life and efforts to fracture the monastic community, solidified his image as the Buddha's greatest personal enemy in traditional accounts.<sup>1</sup> These grave misdeeds traditionally led to his condemnation to the Avīci Hell.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2. The "Inexplicable Yet Precious" Prophecy

Despite Devadatta's widely recognized villainy and his traditional karmic fate, the Lotus Sutra presents a revolutionary counter-narrative. Chapter 12 of the Lotus Sutra explicitly prophesies Devadatta's future enlightenment as a Buddha.<sup>2</sup> This profound teaching forms the central enigma of this report, articulated by Nichiren in his

*Treatise on Prayers* as "inexplicable yet precious." The "inexplicable" aspect acknowledges the apparent contradiction with conventional understandings of karmic retribution, while the "precious" aspect underscores its profound value in demonstrating the universal potential for enlightenment, even for those who have committed the gravest offenses. Nichiren's writings, including the *Treatise on Prayers*, consistently emphasize that prayers based upon the Lotus Sutra are "certain to be fulfilled" and produce "genuine results," suggesting a transformative power that can alter one's fundamental state of mind.<sup>13</sup>

## 1.3. Report Scope and Significance

This report will systematically explore the Devadatta narrative. It will begin by detailing Devadatta's historical actions and their conventional karmic consequences, particularly his descent into Avīci Hell. Subsequently, it will analyze the transformative teachings of the Lotus Sutra, focusing on Chapter 12, which reveals Devadatta's past relationship with Shakyamuni and prophesies his future Buddhahood. A significant portion will be dedicated to Nichiren's unique philosophical interpretation of this prophecy, examining how it underpins concepts such as "changing poison into medicine" and the inherent Buddha-nature in all beings. Finally, the report will provide a comparative analysis of Devadatta's fate across different Buddhist traditions and explore the profound ethical and philosophical implications of a teaching that asserts the capacity for enlightenment even in the most perverse individuals. This examination

aims to illuminate how this teaching fundamentally redefines the understanding of evil, compassion, and the boundless potential for transformation within Buddhist thought.

## **2. Devadatta: The Buddha's Adversary and His Grave Misdeeds**

To fully appreciate the revolutionary nature of Devadatta's prophecy of Buddhahood, it is essential to first establish the severity of his actions and their traditional karmic outcomes within Buddhist narratives. Devadatta's life story is marked by a tragic decline from spiritual aspiration to profound malice.

### **2.1. Early Life and Entry into the Sangha**

Devadatta was born into the Shakya clan, a cousin of Siddhartha Gautama, the future Buddha. His familial ties were deep, as he was the son of King Suppabuddha and Queen Pamita, an aunt of the Buddha. Furthermore, his sister, Yasodhara, was the Buddha's wife, making him also the Buddha's brother-in-law.<sup>1</sup> In the early period of Shakyamuni's ministry, Devadatta, along with other Sakyan princes including Ananda, renounced secular life and entered the monastic order.<sup>1</sup> Initially, he was recognized for his spiritual qualities, possessing grace and even attaining a lower grade of psychic power.<sup>1</sup> However, despite these early attainments, he was unable to achieve any stage of sainthood, such as arhatship.<sup>1</sup>

### **2.2. Rise of Jealousy and Attempts to Usurp Leadership**

Devadatta's inability to progress to higher spiritual stages, coupled with his growing conceit and desire for worldly gain and fame, fostered a deep-seated jealousy towards the Buddha.<sup>1</sup> This internal dissatisfaction manifested as an ambition to lead the Sangha. He openly approached the Buddha, requesting that he step down and appoint him as the new leader.<sup>1</sup> The Buddha, recognizing Devadatta's unworthiness and lack of capacity, firmly rejected this request.<sup>1</sup> This public refusal became a pivotal

moment, triggering Devadatta's intense anger and a vow to take revenge on the Buddha.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.3. Plots to Assassinate the Buddha

Devadatta's malice escalated into direct attempts on the Buddha's life. He forged an alliance with Prince Ajatasattu of Magadha, who was impressed by Devadatta's psychic abilities and became his chief supporter.<sup>1</sup> Devadatta incited Ajatasattu to overthrow and kill his own father, King Bimbisara, a devout patron of the Buddha.<sup>1</sup> Ajatasattu succeeded in this regicide.<sup>1</sup> With the new king's support, Devadatta launched several assassination attempts against the Buddha:

- **Hired Assassins:** His first plot involved hiring a group of assassins to kill the Buddha. However, when these men encountered the Buddha, they were overcome with fear and reverence, abandoning their weapons and instead taking refuge in his teachings. The cunning plan failed as all the hired men became the Buddha's disciples.<sup>1</sup>
- **Boulder Attack:** Devadatta then attempted to kill the Buddha himself. While the Buddha was walking on Vultures' Rock, Devadatta climbed to the peak and hurled a massive stone at him. The stone struck another rock, causing a splinter to fly off and wound the Buddha's foot, drawing blood.<sup>1</sup> This act, shedding the blood of a Buddha, constitutes one of the "Five Anantarika-karma," or grave offenses, which traditionally lead to immediate and severe karmic consequences.<sup>7</sup>
- **Intoxicated Elephant:** His third attempt involved intoxicating Nalagiri, a fierce man-killer elephant, with liquor and sending it to trample the Buddha. However, as the elephant approached, it knelt before the Buddha and was calmed, depicted widely in Buddhist art.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.4. Causing a Schism in the Sangha

When direct assassination attempts failed, Devadatta resorted to a more deceitful plan to undermine the Buddha's authority and split the Sangha community.<sup>1</sup> He proposed five stricter rules for monks: dwelling all their lives in the forest, living only on alms obtained by begging, wearing robes made from rags collected from dust

heaps and cemeteries, living at the foot of trees, and refraining from eating fish or meat throughout their lives.<sup>1</sup> The Buddha, however, did not approve of making these rules compulsory, allowing monks to follow them if they wished but not imposing them on all.<sup>1</sup> Devadatta exploited this decision to gain supporters, particularly among newly ordained monks who were less familiar with the Dharma.<sup>1</sup> This act of creating a schism within the Sangha is another of the Five Anantarika-karma.<sup>7</sup> Despite his initial success in luring away about 500 monks, these misled followers eventually returned to the Buddha after Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallana explained the true meaning of the Dharma to them.<sup>1</sup>

## **2.5. Traditional Karmic Consequence**

As a direct result of his numerous misdeeds, particularly the two Anantarika-karma, Devadatta is traditionally said to have fallen into Avīci Hell alive.<sup>2</sup> Accounts describe him growing desperately ill as his plans failed, and before his death, he sincerely regretted his actions and wished to see the Buddha. However, the ripening fruits of his evil karma prevented him from doing so. He died near the gate of Jetavana monastery, and the earth opened up, swallowing him and sending him straight to Avīci Hell.<sup>1</sup> His suffering in this realm is depicted as relentless and prolonged, a direct consequence of his actions.<sup>4</sup>

An examination of Devadatta's trajectory reveals a clear escalation of malice. His initial spiritual attainments, as documented in early accounts<sup>1</sup>, gradually gave way to conceit and jealousy, particularly after his failure to achieve higher stages of sainthood.<sup>1</sup> This progression suggests that unchecked ambition and attachment to worldly recognition can profoundly corrupt an individual's spiritual path, leading to increasingly destructive actions. The fact that he committed two of the "Five Anantarika-karma"<sup>7</sup>, considered the gravest offenses in Buddhism, highlights the extreme severity of his actions. This context is crucial, as it sets the stage for the profound and seemingly paradoxical teaching of his eventual Buddhahood in the Lotus Sutra, which challenges the immediate and severe consequences traditionally associated with such transgressions.

## **3. The Hell of Incessant Suffering (Avīci Naraka): A Realm of**

# Unrelenting Torment

The concept of Avīci Hell is central to understanding the gravity of Devadatta's traditional karmic fate and the revolutionary nature of the Lotus Sutra's teaching. Avīci represents the lowest and most severe realm of suffering in Buddhist cosmology.

## 3.1. Description and Characteristics of Avīci

Avīci (Sanskrit and Pali for "without waves" or "incessant") is depicted as the lowest level of Naraka, or "hell" realm, in Buddhism, characterized by the most intense suffering.<sup>7</sup> It is described as a cube of immense proportions, approximately 20,000 yojanas (240,000 to 300,000 kilometers) on each side, buried deep beneath the earth.<sup>7</sup> The term "incessant" refers to the suffering experienced within this realm, which is without periods of respite.<sup>7</sup> It is also known as the "nonstop way" (無間道) because, even after an offending soul passes away following one kalpa of torment, it is reborn in the same place to suffer for another kalpa, and this cycle continues until the accumulated bad karma is fully exhausted.<sup>7</sup> The realm is characterized by perpetual flames and intense agony, symbolizing the consequences of evil karma and serving as a reminder of moral failings.<sup>8</sup>

## 3.2. Offenses Leading to Rebirth in Avīci

Rebirth in Avīci is generally reserved for those who have committed one or more of the "Five Anantarika-karma" ("Grave Offenses").<sup>7</sup> These offenses are considered so heinous that they lead to immediate and severe karmic ripening. The five grave offenses include:

- Intentionally killing one's father.<sup>7</sup>
- Intentionally killing one's mother.<sup>7</sup>
- Killing an arhat (an enlightened being).<sup>7</sup>
- Shedding the blood of a Buddha.<sup>7</sup> Devadatta committed this by wounding the Buddha's foot with a stone.<sup>1</sup>
- Creating a schism within the Sangha (the community of Buddhist monks, nuns,

and laypeople striving for enlightenment).<sup>7</sup> Devadatta committed this by attempting to divide the monastic order.<sup>1</sup>

### **3.3. Duration and Nature of Suffering**

Traditional accounts state that Devadatta fell into Avīci Hell alive due to his misdeeds.<sup>2</sup> He wished to seek forgiveness from the Buddha in his final moments, but before he could reach him, the earth opened up and swallowed him, sending him directly to Avīci.<sup>4</sup> His suffering in Avīci is depicted as relentless and prolonged, a direct and severe consequence of his actions.<sup>4</sup>

The description of Avīci highlights a fundamental aspect of Buddhist thought: the tension between strict karmic accountability for grave offenses and the principle of impermanence. While the suffering is depicted as "incessant" and lasting for "innumerable kalpas," the crucial qualifier that it is "ultimately impermanent"<sup>7</sup> indicates that even the most severe karmic consequences are not eternal damnation. This distinction is vital; it suggests that while the immediate karmic ripening is unavoidable, the ultimate spiritual potential is not permanently foreclosed. This sets the stage for the Lotus Sutra's teaching, which offers a path out of this seemingly endless cycle, even for those who have committed Anantarika-karma.

The term "unforgivable heinous karma"<sup>9</sup> associated with Anantarika-karma, when juxtaposed with the Lotus Sutra's prophecy of Devadatta's Buddhahood, suggests a redefinition of what is truly "unforgivable" within the Mahayana framework. While the immediate karmic ripening, such as falling into Avīci, is an unavoidable consequence, the ultimate spiritual potential is not permanently foreclosed. This implies a deeper, inherent nature, known as Buddha-nature, that transcends even the most severe accumulated negative karma.

## **4. The Lotus Sutra's Revolutionary Teaching: Devadatta's Prophecy of Buddhahood**

The "Devadatta" chapter (Chapter 12) of the Lotus Sutra stands as a pivotal text within

Buddhist scripture, renowned for its groundbreaking teachings that fundamentally challenge conventional doctrines regarding who can attain Buddhahood and how quickly. This chapter introduces concepts that were revolutionary for their time, particularly the capacity for enlightenment in individuals previously deemed incapable.

#### **4.1. Introduction to the "Devadatta" Chapter (Chapter 12)**

The "Devadatta" chapter, known as Hoke-kyō or Daibadatta-bon, is the twelfth chapter of the Lotus Sutra.<sup>10</sup> Its significance lies in its radical assertion that "both women and evil persons are capable of attaining Buddhahood in their present forms".<sup>10</sup> This teaching directly contradicted provisional or pre-Lotus Sutra doctrines, which often denied or severely limited the possibility of enlightenment for these groups. Furthermore, the chapter introduces the principle of attaining enlightenment "without completing many kalpas of practice," suggesting a more immediate path to Buddhahood.<sup>10</sup>

#### **4.2. Shakyamuni's Revelation: Devadatta as Past Teacher**

A profound revelation within this chapter recontextualizes Devadatta's relationship with Shakyamuni Buddha. Shakyamuni discloses that in a past existence, he was a king who renounced his throne to seek the truth.<sup>2</sup> For a thousand years, this king diligently served a seer named Asita, who in turn taught him the Lotus Sutra.<sup>10</sup> Crucially, Shakyamuni then reveals that this very seer, Asita, was none other than Devadatta.<sup>2</sup> This revelation transforms Devadatta's role from a mere antagonist to a "good friend" who, through his teachings and even his opposition, enabled Shakyamuni to "fully master Six Paramitas" and ultimately attain Supreme Perfect Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> This implies that adversity, even from those who cause harm, can serve a crucial, albeit uncomfortable, function in sharpening one's resolve and deepening one's practice, ultimately contributing to enlightenment.

#### **4.3. The Prophecy of Devadatta's Future Buddhahood**



Following this extraordinary revelation, Shakyamuni Buddha prophesies that in the distant future, Devadatta will attain enlightenment as a Buddha named Heavenly King (King of the Heavenly Gods Tathagata).<sup>2</sup> His lifespan as a Buddha would extend for twenty medium kalpas, and his True Dharma would endure for another twenty medium kalpas.<sup>11</sup> This prediction, despite Devadatta's fall into Avīci Hell, powerfully demonstrates that "even one disposed to evil has the potential for enlightenment".<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.4. The Dragon King's Daughter: A Parallel Case of Instantaneous Enlightenment

The "Devadatta" chapter further reinforces its revolutionary message through the narrative of the eight-year-old daughter of the Dragon King. She attains supreme Buddha wisdom instantaneously.<sup>10</sup> This narrative directly challenges prevailing traditional views, particularly those held by Bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulated and Shariputra, who argued that Buddhahood required extensive austerities over many kalpas and that women were inherently incapable of enlightenment due to "five obstacles".<sup>10</sup> The Dragon Girl's immediate transformation into a male form and perfection of bodhisattva practice before preaching the Lotus Sutra serves as a powerful symbol of universal and immediate enlightenment, regardless of gender or physical form.<sup>10</sup> Nichiren later elaborated that her attainment signifies that "all women will attain Buddhahood".<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.5. Key Messages of the "Devadatta" Chapter

The "Devadatta" chapter of the Lotus Sutra conveys several key revolutionary teachings:

- **Universal Buddhahood:** It asserts that all beings, irrespective of their past actions or current form (including evil persons and women), possess the inherent Buddha-nature and the capacity to attain enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> This represents a fundamental redefinition of the scope of salvation, asserting an inherent, universal potential for enlightenment that transcends conventional karmic limitations and social or gender biases. This shift is central to Mahayana Buddhism's "Greater Vehicle" concept.

- **Instantaneous Attainment:** The chapter introduces the concept that enlightenment can be achieved quickly, without the necessity of accumulating merit over countless kalpas of austere practice.<sup>10</sup> This challenges the traditional linear, arduous path to enlightenment, implying that Buddhahood is not merely a distant goal but an inherent state that can be "opened" or "revealed" <sup>19</sup> in the present moment through the power of the Lotus Sutra.
- **Irrelevance of Form:** The physical or social form of a living being is presented as irrelevant to the attainment of Buddhahood.<sup>10</sup> This teaching dismantles rigid hierarchical views of spiritual attainment and emphasizes an intrinsic, universal potential.

The "Devadatta" chapter's explicit granting of Buddhahood to those previously deemed incapable (evil persons, women, and those of the two vehicles) is not a minor adjustment but a fundamental redefinition of the scope of salvation. This radical inclusivity is a foundational aspect of Mahayana Buddhism. Furthermore, the concept of "attaining enlightenment without completing many kalpas of practice" and the Dragon Girl's instantaneous Buddhahood challenges the traditional linear, arduous path to enlightenment. This implies that Buddhahood is not merely a distant goal achieved through incremental accumulation of merit over vast periods, but an inherent state that can be "opened" or "revealed" <sup>19</sup> in the present moment through the power of the Lotus Sutra. This has profound implications for the nature of practice and the accessibility of enlightenment. The revelation that Devadatta was Shakyamuni's past teacher <sup>2</sup> introduces a profound pedagogical understanding: even an adversary, through their opposition, can serve as a catalyst for spiritual growth and enlightenment for others. This transforms the understanding of "evil" from a purely negative force to one that, paradoxically, contributes to the advancement of good and the realization of Buddhahood.

**Table 1: Revolutionary Teachings of the Lotus Sutra (Devadatta Chapter)**

Teaching	Traditional View (Pre-Lotus Sutra)	Lotus Sutra Teaching	Significance
Universal Buddhahood for Evil	Denied or required immense kalpas of	Devadatta, despite grave misdeeds and	Even those "disposed to evil" possess the

Persons	purification, often leading to Avīci Hell as a definitive end. <sup>6</sup>	fall into Avīci, prophesied to become Buddha Heavenly King. <sup>2</sup>	potential for enlightenment, challenging rigid karmic retribution. <sup>2</sup>
Universal Buddhahood for Women	Denied or required transformation into a male form. <sup>10</sup>	Eight-year-old Dragon King's Daughter attains instantaneous Buddhahood in her present form. <sup>10</sup>	Breaks gender barriers to enlightenment; "one example that stands for all the rest". <sup>10</sup>
Immediate Attainment of Buddhahood	Required countless kalpas of arduous practice. <sup>10</sup>	Demonstrated by Dragon King's Daughter; inherent Buddha-nature can be revealed quickly. <sup>10</sup>	Shifts focus from linear, time-bound accumulation to instantaneous realization of inherent potential. <sup>19</sup>

This table systematically contrasts the revolutionary teachings of the Lotus Sutra's "Devadatta" chapter with the prevailing pre-Lotus Sutra doctrines. By explicitly laying out the "Traditional View" versus the "Lotus Sutra Teaching" and their "Significance," it provides a clear, concise, and comparative overview. This structure allows for an immediate understanding of the radical nature of the Lotus Sutra's inclusivity and its departure from earlier, more restrictive views on enlightenment. It serves as a strong visual summary of the core doctrinal shifts discussed in this section, reinforcing the "inexplicable yet precious" theme of the user's query.

## 5. Nichiren's Interpretation: The "Inexplicable Yet Precious" Path to Enlightenment

Nichiren (1222–1282) profoundly interpreted the Lotus Sutra's teachings, particularly the prophecy of Devadatta's Buddhahood, as central to his philosophy. His understanding elevates the Lotus Sutra as the supreme teaching and offers a unique framework for comprehending universal enlightenment and the transformation of adversity.

## 5.1. The Centrality of the Lotus Sutra in Nichiren Buddhism

Nichiren considered the Lotus Sutra (specifically Kumārajīva's translation) to be the "most supreme" and "highest teaching" of Shakyamuni Buddha.<sup>18</sup> In his view, all earlier teachings were merely preparatory or "provisional," designed to lead people to the ultimate truth revealed in the Lotus Sutra.<sup>18</sup> Nichiren firmly believed that the Lotus Sutra was the only teaching capable of leading individuals to liberation in the Final Dharma Age (Mappō), a period he believed his contemporaries were living through.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, he advocated for "exclusive devotion" to the Lotus Sutra as the sole path to enlightenment.<sup>22</sup>

## 5.2. Analysis of the Passage from *Treatise on Prayers* (Kitō-shō)

The user's query highlights Nichiren's statement from his *Treatise on Prayers*: "This is indeed inexplicable yet precious. If Devadatta does not become a Buddha, the numerous evil people who were induced by him to enter into his evil comradeship would never be able to escape the torment of the Hell of Incessant Suffering. It is solely due to the great favor of the Lotus Sutra that all of Devadatta's comrades, too, are allowed to be Buddhas." This passage is foundational to understanding Nichiren's perspective. It underscores the "great favor"<sup>11</sup> of the Lotus Sutra in extending salvation not only to Devadatta, despite his heinous crimes, but also to his followers, who would otherwise be condemned to Avīci Hell [User Query].

Nichiren's writings emphasize the certainty of prayers rooted in the Lotus Sutra. He declares with "absolute conviction" that "the prayers offered by a practitioner of the Lotus Sutra will be answered" and that "Prayer that is based upon the Lotus Sutra is a prayer that is certain to be fulfilled".<sup>13</sup> This establishes a direct link between the power of the Lotus Sutra and the efficacy of prayer, suggesting that such practice enables the transformation of even severe karma and one's fundamental state of mind.<sup>13</sup>

## 5.3. The Principle of "Changing Poison into Medicine"

Nichiren's interpretation of Devadatta's Buddhahood serves as a prime illustration of

the Buddhist principle of "changing poison into medicine".<sup>13</sup> This concept refers to the ability to transform negative circumstances, actions, or even individuals into positive outcomes and opportunities for profound spiritual growth. In this context, Devadatta's persistent opposition to the Buddha, rather than being solely destructive, is reinterpreted as a catalyst. Accounts indicate that Devadatta's opposition "spurred the Buddha on to his attainment of the Way" <sup>16</sup> and enabled him to "fully master Six Paramitas".<sup>11</sup> This redefines Devadatta's role, paradoxically portraying him as a "good friend" who, through his adversarial actions, contributed to the Buddha's own enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> This perspective suggests that challenges and adversaries, when confronted with the power of the Mystic Law (the Lotus Sutra), can be transmuted into fuel for deeper enlightenment and the manifestation of inherent Buddha-nature.<sup>13</sup>

#### **5.4. Universal Buddhahood and Inherent Buddha-Nature (Ichinen Sanzen)**

Central to Nichiren's philosophy is the assertion that all unenlightened beings innately possess the Buddha realm, a concept known as the mutual possession of the ten dharma realms (jikkai gogu).<sup>24</sup> He clarifies that "attaining Buddhahood" does not mean acquiring something new, but rather "to open or reveal" the Buddha nature that individuals "already possess".<sup>19</sup> This understanding means that Devadatta's Buddhahood, along with the instantaneous enlightenment of the Dragon King's Daughter, serve as powerful "admonitions" <sup>12</sup> that demonstrate the immense power of the Lotus Sutra and the universal potential for Buddhahood in "evil persons" and "women" respectively.<sup>10</sup> This principle underpins the concept of "attaining Buddhahood in this lifetime," which contrasts sharply with the belief that enlightenment requires countless lifetimes of arduous practices.<sup>19</sup>

#### **5.5. Compassion and the Transformation of Society**

Nichiren's teachings are deeply rooted in compassion, with the ultimate aim of leading all people to enlightenment and actualizing the ideal of "establishing the correct teaching for the peace of the land".<sup>23</sup> His stern critiques of "wrong views" and "provisional teachings" <sup>22</sup> were not acts of condemnation but were considered a "profoundly compassionate act".<sup>22</sup> In his understanding, advocating for exclusive devotion to the Lotus Sutra was the only path to liberation in the Latter Day of the

Law, thus serving the highest good for all beings.

Nichiren's interpretation of Devadatta as a "good friend" and a catalyst for Shakyamuni's enlightenment introduces a profound non-dualistic perspective where even actions traditionally labeled as "evil" can serve a higher, ultimately beneficial purpose within the grand scheme of universal enlightenment. This challenges a simplistic good-vs-evil dichotomy and suggests a more complex, interwoven reality where adversity can be a necessary component of spiritual progress. The emphasis on prayer based on the Lotus Sutra leading to "genuine results" and transforming "fundamental state of mind" <sup>13</sup> implies a strong sense of active agency in karmic transformation. While traditional karma might appear deterministic, Nichiren asserts that the practice of the Lotus Sutra empowers individuals to "change poison into medicine" <sup>13</sup> and overcome negative tendencies, even those leading to Avīci. This offers a dynamic view of karma where present action and faith can alter future outcomes, rather than merely being bound by past deeds.

**Table 2: Nichiren's Core Philosophical Tenets on Universal Buddhahood**

Tenet	Description	Relevance to Devadatta
Supremacy of the Lotus Sutra	The Lotus Sutra is the ultimate and highest teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha, capable of leading all beings to enlightenment in the Latter Day of the Law. <sup>18</sup>	The Lotus Sutra's "great favor" is the sole reason for Devadatta's and his comrades' Buddhahood. <sup>11</sup>
Inherent Buddha-Nature (Ichinen Sanzen)	All beings, regardless of their current state or past actions, innately possess the Buddha realm and the potential for enlightenment. <sup>19</sup>	Devadatta's Buddhahood reveals that "even one disposed to evil has the potential to become a Buddha" by manifesting this inherent nature. <sup>2</sup>
Changing Poison into Medicine	Negative circumstances, actions, or individuals can be transformed into catalysts for profound spiritual growth and	Devadatta's opposition "spurred the Buddha on to his attainment of the Way" and allowed him to master the Six

	positive outcomes through the power of the Mystic Law. <sup>13</sup>	Paramitas, making him a "good friend". <sup>11</sup>
Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime	Enlightenment can be achieved in one's current existence, without requiring countless kalpas of practice. <sup>10</sup>	His prophecy, despite his fall into Avīci, signifies that ultimate liberation is not eternally deferred, but accessible through the Lotus Sutra's power. <sup>10</sup>

This table systematically distills Nichiren's core philosophical tenets that underpin his understanding of Devadatta's Buddhahood. By providing a clear description of each tenet and explicitly linking it to the Devadatta narrative, it demonstrates how Nichiren integrates this seemingly paradoxical event into a coherent and transformative worldview. This helps in understanding the philosophical underpinnings of Nichiren's "inexplicable yet precious" statement.

## 6. Comparative Perspectives: Devadatta's Fate in Theravada vs. Mahayana

The narrative of Devadatta's ultimate fate serves as a microcosm of the fundamental doctrinal divergences between the two major branches of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana. Their differing accounts of Devadatta's spiritual destiny highlight distinct soteriological and ethical frameworks.

### 6.1. Devadatta in Theravada Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism, often considered the school closest to the original teachings of the Buddha, emphasizes strict karmic accountability and the pursuit of individual enlightenment, known as Arhatship.<sup>26</sup> Within this tradition, Devadatta's fate is presented as a stark example of the severe consequences of grave offenses. He is described as having faced "utter destruction" <sup>2</sup> and a definitive fall into Avīci Hell.<sup>4</sup> While some accounts mention his sincere regret before death <sup>1</sup>, his evil karma had already begun to ripen, preventing him from seeing the Buddha and leading to his

immediate descent into the lowest hell.<sup>1</sup> Although there is a rare mention in some Theravada texts that Devadatta would eventually become a Pacceka Buddha named Atthissara in the "distant future" due to his early holy life<sup>1</sup>, this outcome is still predicated on a prolonged period of suffering in Avīci, emphasizing the working off of karma.<sup>7</sup> The Theravada tradition generally focuses on the historical Buddha and discourages aspirations for Buddhahood if motivated by ego.<sup>26</sup>

## **6.2. Devadatta in Mahayana Buddhism (Lotus Sutra Perspective)**

In contrast, Mahayana Buddhism places a strong emphasis on the Bodhisattva ideal, which involves postponing one's own enlightenment to compassionately help all beings achieve liberation.<sup>26</sup> The Lotus Sutra, a foundational Mahayana text, presents a radically different ultimate fate for Devadatta. Despite his grave offenses and his fall into Avīci Hell, the Lotus Sutra explicitly prophesies his future Buddhahood as Heavenly King.<sup>2</sup> This teaching reflects Mahayana's core tenet that "all beings can attain buddhahood" and that there are "no permanent barriers" to enlightenment.<sup>18</sup> Mahayana often interprets Dharma more metaphorically and emphasizes the inherent Buddha-nature (Tathāgatagarbha) present in all sentient beings.<sup>24</sup>

## **6.3. Reconciling the Apparent Contradiction**

The starkly differing narratives regarding Devadatta's ultimate fate highlight distinct pedagogical approaches and ultimate goals within the Buddhist traditions. Theravada's emphasis on immediate karmic consequences serves as a powerful ethical deterrent, reinforcing the importance of moral conduct and individual purification. This perspective maintains a strong focus on the direct, undeniable results of actions.

Conversely, Mahayana's universalist approach, exemplified by the Lotus Sutra, focuses on the ultimate potential for all beings to achieve enlightenment. This perspective prioritizes boundless compassion and the transformative power of the Dharma, suggesting that inherent Buddha-nature can transcend even seemingly insurmountable karmic barriers. The Devadatta story thus becomes a critical point of



divergence, showcasing the Mahayana's radical inclusivity as a "Greater Vehicle".<sup>27</sup>

The contrasting fates of Devadatta in Theravada (definitive suffering in Avīci, possible distant Pacceka-Buddha) versus Mahayana (prophesied Buddhahood as Heavenly King) illustrate a fundamental divergence in soteriology. Theravada's approach, while acknowledging the eventual impermanence of hell, emphasizes strict karmic consequence and individual effort towards Arhatship. Mahayana, particularly the Lotus Sutra, extends compassion to the extreme, asserting an inherent potential that transcends even the gravest karma, making universal Buddhahood the ultimate goal. This implies a spectrum of Buddhist compassion, where Mahayana pushes the boundaries of inclusivity further than Theravada. The Devadatta narrative, particularly its contrasting outcomes, functions as a powerful doctrinal statement rather than a mere historical account. In Theravada, it reinforces the inescapability of grave karma. In Mahayana, it functions as a revolutionary assertion of universal Buddha-nature and the transformative power of the Lotus Sutra, even for the most "evil." This highlights how religious narratives are often constructed or reinterpreted to convey specific theological and ethical truths.

**Table 3: Devadatta's Narrative: Theravada vs. Mahayana Comparison**

Aspect	Theravada Buddhism	Mahayana Buddhism
Primary Goal of Practice	Arhatship (individual enlightenment). <sup>26</sup>	Buddhahood (via Bodhisattva path, universal salvation). <sup>26</sup>
Emphasis	Wisdom, strict adherence to precepts, reverence for the historical Buddha. <sup>26</sup>	Compassion, inherent Buddha-nature, reverence for myriad Buddhas/Bodhisattvas. <sup>26</sup>
Devadatta's Actions	Attempted assassination of Buddha, caused schism (Anantarika-karma). <sup>1</sup>	Attempted assassination of Buddha, caused schism (Anantarika-karma). <sup>1</sup>
Devadatta's Immediate Karmic Consequence	Fell into Avīci Hell alive. <sup>2</sup>	Fell into Avīci Hell alive. <sup>2</sup>

Devadatta's Ultimate Fate	"Utter destruction," suffering in Avīci, possible future Pacceka Buddha after immense suffering. <sup>1</sup> Emphasis on working off karma. <sup>7</sup>	Prophesied to become Buddha Heavenly King. <sup>2</sup> Devadatta also revealed as past teacher of Shakyamuni. <sup>2</sup>
Interpretation of "Evil Persons"	Strict karmic consequences; grave offenses lead to severe, prolonged suffering. <sup>7</sup>	Even "evil persons" have the potential for Buddhahood; inherent Buddha-nature transcends karma. <sup>2</sup>

This comparative table is invaluable for clearly illustrating the fundamental differences in how Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism approach the Devadatta narrative and, by extension, their broader soteriological frameworks. By presenting side-by-side comparisons of key aspects, it allows for a rapid and clear understanding of the distinct interpretations and their underlying philosophical reasons. This highlights how the "inexplicable" nature of Devadatta's Buddhahood is deeply rooted in Mahayana's unique doctrinal stance.

## 7. Ethical and Philosophical Implications of Universal Enlightenment

The Lotus Sutra's teaching on universal enlightenment, particularly as interpreted by Nichiren, carries profound ethical and philosophical implications. It compels a re-evaluation of fundamental concepts such as good, evil, compassion, and accountability, offering a transformative lens through which to view human potential and societal interaction.

### 7.1. Redefining "Evil" and the Nature of Buddha-Nature

The prophecy of Devadatta's Buddhahood fundamentally challenges the notion of evil as an intrinsic or immutable state.<sup>2</sup> It suggests that "evil" is a temporary manifestation, a deluded state that can ultimately be transcended. This reinforces the core Buddhist concept that all beings, without exception, possess an inherent Buddha-nature.<sup>11</sup> This

implies that even the "worst evildoers" are capable of "awakening to the truth about themselves" <sup>18</sup>, revealing their innate potential for enlightenment. The "inexplicable yet precious" nature of Devadatta's Buddhahood thereby challenges the idea of permanent damnation, offering a path for ultimate liberation even from the deepest hells.<sup>7</sup> This redefinition of evil moves beyond a simple moral judgment to a deeper understanding of suffering as a temporary condition that can be purified and transformed.

## **7.2. The Profound Nature of Compassion**

The Lotus Sutra's teaching extends the concept of compassion to its furthest possible limit, embracing even those who cause great harm.<sup>11</sup> Compassion in this context is not merely a feeling of pity but an active commitment to seeking the happiness and enlightenment of all beings, including one's adversaries. It encourages practitioners not to build their own happiness on the misfortune of others.<sup>25</sup> This aligns with the Mahayana emphasis on the Bodhisattva practice, where the primary goal is to help all beings attain Buddhahood, reflecting a universal desire for liberation.<sup>27</sup> This expansive view of compassion fosters a mindset of "equanimity" towards "friends, enemies, and anyone in-between" <sup>31</sup>, promoting non-anger and forbearance even in the face of adversity.<sup>35</sup>

## **7.3. Accountability and Karma within Universal Salvation**

While the Lotus Sutra promises universal enlightenment, it does not negate the principles of karma and accountability. Devadatta's immediate descent into Avīci Hell after his misdeeds clearly demonstrates that consequences for actions ripen and are experienced.<sup>2</sup> Karma is understood as the law of cause and effect, where intentional actions mold consciousness and yield results in future lives.<sup>33</sup> However, the Lotus Sutra and Nichiren's teachings introduce a crucial nuance: through the transformative power of the Dharma and one's faith, negative karma can be purified or transmuted, leading to an eventual, higher outcome.<sup>13</sup> This implies that while consequences are real and must be faced, ultimate spiritual destiny is not irrevocably fixed by past actions alone. The ethical framework shifts from a purely retributive justice model, where punishment is the end, to a transformative one, where the ultimate aim is the

liberation of all beings from suffering.<sup>33</sup> This implies a profound optimism about the potential for change in all beings.

#### **7.4. Impact on Perception and Treatment of Others**

The understanding that "even those who cause great harm are capable of becoming enlightened" profoundly alters how one perceives and interacts with others [User Query]. This perspective encourages practitioners to cultivate a mindset that seeks to help others awaken to their inherent potential, rather than simply condemning them.<sup>25</sup> It fosters an environment of active engagement with suffering, recognizing that even the most challenging individuals possess the seed of Buddhahood. This transformation in perception is not merely theoretical; it has direct implications for interpersonal relationships and broader societal efforts towards peace and harmony.

If all beings possess inherent Buddha-nature and the potential for enlightenment, then the ethical imperative shifts from merely avoiding harm to actively cultivating compassion and working for the enlightenment of *all*, including adversaries. This transforms the practitioner's role from self-focused liberation to a Bodhisattva ideal of benefiting others, fundamentally altering interpersonal and societal ethics.

### **8. Conclusion: The Enduring Significance of Devadatta's Buddhahood**

The narrative of Devadatta's Buddhahood, as revealed in the Lotus Sutra and profoundly interpreted by Nichiren, stands as one of the most compelling and radical teachings in Buddhism. It transcends conventional notions of good and evil, karma, and retribution, offering a universal vision of enlightenment.

This teaching serves as a powerful testament to the radical inclusivity inherent in Mahayana Buddhism. It redefines the nature of "evil," asserting that it is not an immutable state but a temporary manifestation that can be transcended through the inherent Buddha-nature present in all beings. The prophecy of Devadatta's Buddhahood, despite his descent into Avīci Hell, underscores the possibility of

instantaneous enlightenment, even from the depths of the most severe karmic suffering.

Nichiren's interpretation, particularly his principle of "changing poison into medicine," further illuminates this profound concept. It posits that even the most destructive actions and adversaries can be transformed into catalysts for spiritual growth and the manifestation of ultimate good. Devadatta's opposition, viewed through this lens, becomes an integral, albeit paradoxical, component of Shakyamuni's own path to enlightenment. This dynamic understanding of cause and effect empowers individuals to actively engage with their challenges, transforming negative circumstances into opportunities for profound spiritual development.

The ethical implications of this teaching are far-reaching. By recognizing that even those who cause great harm possess the potential for enlightenment, practitioners are compelled to cultivate a boundless compassion that extends to all beings. This perspective fosters a shift in how individuals perceive and interact with others, moving beyond judgment and condemnation towards a proactive engagement aimed at fostering universal awakening. This individual transformation is intrinsically linked to the broader objective of establishing peace and harmony within society.

In essence, the story of Devadatta's Buddhahood offers a timeless message of hope and boundless potential. It affirms that no individual is beyond salvation, and that the path to enlightenment is universally accessible to all who embrace the Mystic Law. This narrative continues to inspire practitioners to cultivate their inherent Buddha-nature and dedicate themselves to the happiness and liberation of all sentient beings, embodying the ultimate triumph of compassion and the enduring power of the Dharma.

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