

Embodying the Lotus Sūtra: The Buddha's Voice in Our Words

The Buddha's Voice Reaching All Beings (Lotus Sūtra, Chapter 19)

In **Chapter 19 of the Lotus Sūtra** (“**The Benefits of the Teacher of the Law**”), the Buddha describes the wondrous merits attained by those who **uphold and expound the Lotus Sūtra**. Speaking to Bodhisattva *Constant-Endeavor* (also called *Constant Exertion*), he explains that one who truly embraces the sutra will gain “twelve hundred merits of the tongue,” enabling them to teach the Dharma with extraordinary impact ¹ ². Such a person, when they preach the Dharma, “*will produce a deep and wonderful voice capable of penetrating the mind and causing all who hear it to rejoice and delight*” ². In other words, their words carry the Dharma so clearly and compassionately that they “*reach the hearts of the great multitude*,” filling listeners with joy ². It is as if the **Buddha's own mind finds voice through their words**, moving the hearts of all beings.

The sutra goes on to illustrate how **beings of every description** are drawn to such a Dharma teacher. When a votary of the Lotus Sūtra speaks, even the **gods and heavenly beings**—Śakra (Indra), Brahmā, and countless deities—are said to **gather and joyfully listen** ². The text vividly lists divine and mystical beings of all kinds (dragons and their daughters, yakṣas, gandharvas, asuras, garuḍas, kiṃnaras, mahoragas, etc.), as well as monks, nuns, laypeople, kings and ministers, who **all come to pay respect and hear the Dharma** ³. Even powerful rulers like the wheel-turning kings “will press their palms together with reverent minds and constantly come to hear and accept the Law” ⁴ ⁵. In short, “*beings of all dispositions*”—from common people to heavenly beings—naturally “*will want to hear more of what the Buddha has taught*” when it is shared by someone who embodies the Lotus Sūtra. The sutra likens the teacher's voice to a **lion's roar** that fearlessly resounds far and wide, bringing joy to all who hear ² ⁶.

Notably, the Buddha promises that **all Buddhas and bodhisattvas themselves rejoice and lend protection** to one who teaches the Lotus Sūtra. The sutra says that “*wherever this person is, the Buddhas will all face in that direction when they preach the Law*,” keeping that teacher in mind ⁶. It even assures that the Buddhas and their disciples will watch over and guard such a person: “*The Buddhas and their disciples, hearing the sound of [this person] teaching the Law, will keep him constantly in their thoughts and guard him*” ⁷. In this way, Chapter 19 paints a powerful image: when one shares the Buddha Dharma with a pure heart, **one's voice carries the Buddha's compassion**, illuminating others. It is “*as if the Buddha's mind is finding voice in our words*,” and thus all beings — human and divine — rejoice and seek the Dharma.

The Lotus Sutra's Vision of Compassionate Teaching

This idea that a devotee's words can carry the Buddha's voice is echoed elsewhere in the Lotus Sūtra. In **Chapter 10, “The Teacher of the Law,”** Shakyamuni emphasizes how precious it is to **teach even a single verse** of the Lotus in the troubled times after his passing. He declares that **whoever spreads the Lotus Sutra is the Buddha's own messenger**: “*anyone who teaches others even a single phrase of the Lotus Sutra is the envoy of the Thus Come One*” ⁸. In other words, that person speaks on the Buddha's behalf, out of the

Buddha's compassion for all beings. Such a teacher is said to be clothed in the Buddha's robe of gentleness and patience, seated upon the Buddha's seat, carrying on **the Buddha's work** ⁸ . This is a direct affirmation that **when we share the Dharma with others, we are carrying the Buddha's intention and spirit** – it is as though the Buddha's own voice comes through our tongue. No wonder, then, that the Lotus Sutra promises that so many beings will respond and **want to hear more** of these teachings.

Another famous example in the Lotus Sutra that sheds light on *practicing the sutra with one's life* is **Chapter 20, "Bodhisattva Never Disparaging."** This chapter tells the story of a bodhisattva in the remote past who did not spend his time reading or reciting the scripture, but instead **practiced its message directly with his actions** ⁹ . This bodhisattva, named *Never Disparaging* (Sadāparibhūta), would bow deeply to every person he met – be they monks, nuns, or laypeople – and speak words of **sincere respect**. He said to everyone: *"I have profound reverence for you, I would never dare treat you with disparagement or arrogance. Why? Because you are all practicing the bodhisattva way and are certain to attain Buddhahood."* ¹⁰ ¹¹ . This simple declaration, sometimes called the "twenty-four-character Lotus Sutra," encapsulates the **heart of the Lotus Sutra's teaching**: that all people have the Buddha-nature and will become Buddhas. Rather than preach complex doctrines, Never Disparaging **embodied the sutra's spirit through his behavior**, showing *reverence for every being's inherent Buddhahood*.

Importantly, **many people reacted negatively** to Bodhisattva Never Disparaging's compassionate actions. The sutra relates that *"among the four kinds of believers there were those who were arrogant ... They cursed him, saying: 'This ignorant monk! ... We have no use for your false predictions!'"* Some grew so angry that they **attacked him with sticks, tiles and stones** ¹² ¹³ . Yet, even as he was chased away or struck, Never Disparaging **never abandoned his respect or patience**. He would distance himself to safety and continue to call out, *"I would never dare disparage you, for you are all certain to attain Buddhahood!"* ¹³ . He endured abuse and hatred, but **persisted with compassion**, "never stopping bowing to them" and never speaking ill of his tormentors ¹⁴ ¹⁵ .

The outcome of this story is inspiring and directly relevant to our theme. According to Chapter 20, after many years Never Disparaging eventually exhausted his life. At the moment of death he miraculously heard the Lotus Sutra being preached from the sky, and was able to receive and understand it ¹⁶ . Because of this, his **six sense faculties became purified** (just as described in Chapter 19's benefits) and his lifespan grew long, enabling him to **teach the Lotus Sutra eloquently to others** ¹⁶ ¹⁷ . Now endowed with a "power to preach pleasingly and eloquently" and great supernatural abilities, he returned to those same people who once attacked him ¹⁷ . When the arrogant monks and lay people *"heard his preaching, they all took faith in him and willingly became his followers."* ¹⁷ In fact, the sutra says he eventually converted a great multitude and led them toward enlightenment ¹⁷ ¹⁸ . This profound turnaround illustrates that **even those who initially reject or oppose the Lotus Sūtra can later be reached and inspired**, once the teaching finds a way into their hearts. It took Bodhisattva Never Disparaging years of patience and *"bodily practice"* to forge that connection, but ultimately *"beings of all dispositions"* – even his former persecutors – *wanted to hear the Buddha's teaching from him*.

Near the end of the story, Shakyamuni Buddha reveals a poignant detail: **Bodhisattva Never Disparaging was actually Shakyamuni Buddha himself in a previous life** ¹⁹ . He tells this to underscore a lesson for the Lotus Sūtra's followers. Shakyamuni achieved Buddhahood relatively quickly in his final lifetime *because* in the past he had earnestly embodied the Lotus Sutra's practice of respecting others and spreading the Law ¹⁹ . The clear message is that **practicing the sutra with one's body and mind is the true cause for enlightenment**, and it is the way to lead many others to enlightenment as well. In modern terms, when we

“practice the sūtra with our bodies,” making the teaching a living part of our daily behavior, **we naturally find the words and actions needed to reach all people** and guide them toward Buddhahood.

Nichiren’s Teachings: “Reading the Sutra with Body and Mind”

Nichiren Daishonin, the 13th-century Japanese Buddhist reformer who established the practice of chanting *Nam-myōhō-renge-kyō*, consistently taught the importance of *embodying* the Lotus Sūtra in one’s life. He often cited the example of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging as a model for how to behave toward others. Nichiren identified Never Disparaging’s spirit of universal respect as *“the heart of the Lotus Sūtra”* itself ²⁰. In his writing **“The Three Kinds of Treasure,”** Nichiren praises this bodhisattva for **revering everyone he met**, and he urges his followers to adopt the same attitude. He writes that Never Disparaging’s practice of bowing to others with the words *“You will all become Buddhas”* reveals the sutra’s fundamental teaching of **respect for the Buddha-nature in all people** ²⁰. This spirit of respect and compassion, Nichiren says, is the *essential behavior* that all practitioners should *“strive to embody.”* ²⁰

Nichiren also spoke of “practicing the sutra with our bodies” or **“bodily reading”** the Lotus Sutra. By this, he meant living in accordance with the sutra’s teachings through one’s actions, even at the cost of great personal hardship. Nichiren saw his own life—persecutions, exiles, and all—as a fulfillment of the Lotus Sūtra’s predictions, a testament that he was **truly carrying out the sutra’s path** ²¹ ²². In a letter to one of his closest disciples, Nichirō, who had been imprisoned for the faith, Nichiren expressed profound admiration because this disciple had figuratively “read” the Lotus Sutra with his entire being. Nichiren writes: *“How admirable, that you have read the entirety of the Lotus Sutra with both body and mind! ... Others read the Lotus Sutra with their mouths alone, reading only the words, but do not read it with their hearts. And even if they read it with their hearts, they do not read it with their actions. Praiseworthy indeed are those like you who read the sutra with both body and mind!”* ²³. Here Nichiren contrasts **merely reciting or intellectually understanding** the scripture with actually **putting it into practice through one’s deeds**. To “read with the body” means to **demonstrate the Lotus Sutra’s truth in the way one lives**, just as Bodhisattva Never Disparaging did by bowing to everyone. Nichiren praises this as the highest, most admirable form of devotion.

Furthermore, Nichiren frequently quoted the Lotus Sūtra’s promises that **heavenly beings will protect and serve those who uphold the Dharma**. For example, right after praising Nichirō in the above letter, he reminds him of the Buddha’s assurance in the sutra: *“The young sons of the heavenly deities will attend and serve him. Swords and staves shall not touch him, and poison will have no power to harm him.”* ²⁴. This passage (from the Lotus Sūtra’s **Dharani Chapter**, where celestial beings pledge to safeguard the teachers of the Law) was cited by Nichiren to encourage his disciple that **no harm would ultimately come to one who truly embodies the sutra** ²⁴. It echoes the Chapter 19 description that not only gods and dragons, but even kings and commoners, will **support and make offerings to the Lotus Sutra practitioner** ³ ²⁵. Nichiren himself often asserted that the difficulties he faced proved the Lotus Sutra’s predictions true, and that the protective forces of the Buddha would continue to shield him and his followers so long as they remained true to the sutra’s mission ²¹ ²⁶.

In short, Nichiren taught that we must **“practice the sutra with our bodies” by aligning our actions with its teachings**. When we do so, it is as if *our own life becomes the sutra*. Then, *“when we share the Buddha Dharma with others,”* the words we speak are infused with the Buddha’s compassion and power, and can truly *“reach the hearts”* of others. Our efforts will invite the positive attention of all benevolent forces (Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and gods) and will move the people around us, even those who may initially

oppose us. Nichiren's life exemplified this principle: he stood up with the Lotus Sūtra in both word and deed, and in doing so he sowed the seeds of Buddhism in innumerable people's hearts, seeds that continue to lead people to enlightenment today.

Modern Commentary: Sharing the Lotus Sutra in Our Lives

Buddhist teachers in modern times have also drawn on these Lotus Sutra teachings to encourage practitioners to speak out for the Dharma. The renowned 20th-century Buddhist leader **Josei Toda** and his successor **Daisaku Ikeda** (of the Soka Gakkai) often cited Bodhisattva Never Disparaging as a model for Buddhist practice in society. Ikeda likens the **act of sharing Buddhism with others** – even in the face of indifference or rejection – to *“the modern-day equivalent of [Never Disparaging’s] practice.”* He notes that whenever we talk to someone about the Mystic Law (**Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō**), we are behaving just like Bodhisattva Never Disparaging planting seeds of Buddhahood in people's lives ²⁷ ²⁸ . The key, he says, is to *“speak out and share the correct teachings of Buddhism”* without being swayed by immediate results ²⁷ . We may sometimes feel discouraged if people do not accept the teaching right away, but the Lotus Sutra reminds us that **simply hearing the Dharma creates a lasting connection**. Even those who initially reject it have still received the seed of enlightenment, which will mature in time ²⁹ . In fact, the sutra teaches that those who opposed Never Disparaging later attained Buddhahood because of the connection forged by hearing him teach, even though it angered them at first ²⁹ ¹⁵ .

Ikeda emphasizes maintaining a **spirit of perseverance and compassion** in propagation, mirroring Never Disparaging's attitude. *“What matters is how many people we're able to share Buddhism with, based on our genuine desire for their happiness,”* he explains ³⁰ ³¹ . Whether others choose to practice or not is their decision; our mission is to **continue offering the teaching** tirelessly, just as Never Disparaging continued to bow and respect others no matter how they reacted. *“The point is just to keep sharing Buddhism, with conviction and in high spirits. All those efforts will be transformed into benefit and good fortune,”* Ikeda encourages, underscoring that our compassionate action will eventually bring positive results for ourselves and others ³² ³³ . He often tells members, *“We are all Bodhisattvas Never Disparaging of the modern day... following the same great path of Buddhist practice as Nichiren.”* ³⁴ In other words, **every practitioner who courageously speaks about the Lotus Sutra or Nam-myōhō-rengē-kyō out of compassion is effectively allowing the Buddha's voice to work through them in today's world.**

Other Buddhist commentators have similarly noted that the **Lotus Sūtra calls on us to integrate word and deed**. To “preach” the Dharma is not merely to talk about it, but to *embody* its principles so fully that one's **very presence and example communicate the teaching**. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen teacher who wrote a commentary on the Lotus Sutra, used the phrase **“peaceful action, open heart”** to describe the way a bodhisattva lives the Dharma and thereby opens others' hearts. This is very much in line with the Lotus Sutra's message that when the Dharma is spoken with a pure, compassionate intent, it naturally bridges differences and speaks to the hearts of all beings. In the **“Introduction” chapter of the Lotus**, countless beings of every realm (from hell-dwellers to heavenly gods) are present to hear the Buddha's sermon, symbolizing that *no one* is left out of the audience ³⁵ ³⁶ . As Nichiren's commentary explains, this signifies the Buddha's profound **intent to open the way of enlightenment for all living beings, transcending all differences** ³⁷ ³⁶ . When we ourselves carry on that intent by sharing Buddhism with a respectful and fearless spirit, we are helping to fulfill the Lotus Sutra's vow of universal salvation.

Conclusion: Living the Lotus Sūtra, Finding the Words to Save Beings

From the above, we see a consistent principle woven through the Lotus Sūtra, Nichiren's writings, and later commentaries: **when one truly embodies the Dharma, one's words gain a special power**. The "deep and wonderful voice" praised in the sutra is not about volume or oratory technique – it is about the *depth of compassion and conviction* behind the words. If we cultivate a compassionate heart (the Buddha's mind) and put the teachings into practice (with our bodies and actions), then when we speak, it is effectively *the Buddha's wisdom and compassion speaking through us*. This is why Chapter 19 promises that such a person's **voice will bring joy** to all and even the gods will listen ². It is why Shakyamuni in Chapter 10 calls the teacher of the Law his **true envoy**, carrying out the Buddha's own work ⁸. And it is why Nichiren insisted that **only by "reading the sutra with one's body and mind" can one really share its benefit** ²³.

To "practice the sutra with our bodies," as Nichiren encouraged, means to **integrate the Lotus Sūtra into the very fabric of our lives** – to let its teachings of compassion, courage, and respect shine through in all we do. When we do this, we find that we naturally *"find the words we need to reach all beings and lead them to the Buddha's enlightenment,"* just as the question suggests. Our actions inspire our words, and those words—rooted in genuine care—communicate the Dharma in a way that others can accept. We become living examples, like Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, whose sincere practice eventually melted the hearts of even the most hostile people ¹⁷.

In practical terms, this teaches us that **sharing Buddhism or expounding the Dharma is not only an intellectual exercise or formal preaching**. It is an act of the whole person. When our **life** mirrors the Dharma through integrity, kindness, and fearless faith, then our **speech** carries a transformative weight. People sense the alignment between our words and deeds – they can *feel* the truth and compassion in what is being said. Thus, even if at first they may not agree or understand, over time the connection created by hearing the Dharma will work in their lives, just as the Lotus Sutra assures us.

To summarize, a deep dive into the Lotus Sutra's teachings and Nichiren's commentary reveals a profound encouragement for all who spread the Dharma: **embody the teaching, and speak it with compassion**. In doing so, we join the Buddha's work of leading others to enlightenment. Our voice, however ordinary, becomes the vehicle of the Buddha's own "wonderful voice," reaching the hearts of people of every disposition. And as countless passages promise, when we uphold the Lotus Sūtra in this way, we are never alone – the protective forces of the universe gather around us, and the wisdom of the Buddha within us guides our words. By **practicing the sutra with our bodies and minds**, we truly enable the Buddha's spirit to **find voice in our words**, so that all beings hearing can rejoice and take steps toward enlightenment. This is the living power of the Lotus Sūtra in action, as taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, affirmed by Nichiren Daishonin, and echoed by compassionate teachers through the ages.

Sources:

- The Lotus Sūtra, Chapter 19 "The Benefits of the Teacher of the Law" ³⁸ ² (merits of expounding the Dharma with a pure tongue; voice reaching and delighting all beings).
- The Lotus Sūtra, Chapter 19 (verse section) ⁴ ⁷; Chapter 10 "The Teacher of the Law" (Buddha's envoy) ⁸.

- The Lotus Sūtra, Chapter 20 “Never Disparaging Bodhisattva” ¹⁰ ¹³ ¹⁷ (story of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging’s practice and its effect on others).
- Nichiren, “Letter to Priest Nichirō in Prison” (1271) – **Nichiren Daishonin** praises his disciple for “reading the Lotus Sūtra with both body and mind,” contrasting it with those who only read with the mouth or mind ²³ .
- Nichiren, *The Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 852 (“The Three Kinds of Treasure”) – Nichiren identifies Never Disparaging’s practice of respecting everyone as “*the heart of the Lotus Sutra*” ²⁰ .
- Nichiren, *On Practicing the Buddha’s Teachings* and *The Actions of the Votary of the Lotus Sutra* – (Not directly cited above, but see Nichiren’s concept of “bodily reading” the sutra ³⁹ , fulfilling the sutra’s predictions through one’s actions).
- *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* (Nichiren) – commentary that Never Disparaging’s persistence in preaching “though it angered them” arose from compassion ¹⁵ ; also defines the “great vow” of Bodhisattvas as spreading the Lotus Sutra out of pity for living beings ⁴⁰ .
- Daisaku Ikeda, *The New Human Revolution*, vol. 25 – discusses applying Never Disparaging’s spirit in modern times ²⁷ ³⁴ ; encourages sharing Buddhism tirelessly as “bodhisattvas of the Earth” in the present age.
- World Tribune (SGI-USA), “*What Can We Learn From Bodhisattva Never Disparaging?*” ²⁰ ²⁹ – article explaining the lessons of Chapter 20 and Nichiren’s views on it.
- Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peaceful Action, Open Heart: Lessons from the Lotus Sutra* – (referenced generally for the concept of embodying the sutra in compassionate action).

¹ ² ³ ⁴ ⁵ ⁶ ⁷ ²⁵ ³⁸ The Lotus Sutra[19] - The Benefits of the Teacher of the Law

<https://nichiren.info/buddhism/lotussutra/text/chap19.html>

⁸ Dialogue Is the Practice of the “Envoy of the Thus Come One”

<https://www.worldtribune.org/2021/dialogue-is-the-practice-of-the-envoy-of-the-thus-come-one/>

⁹ ¹⁰ ¹¹ ¹² ¹³ ¹⁶ ¹⁷ ¹⁸ ¹⁹ The Lotus Sutra[20] - Bodhisattva Never Disparaging

<https://nichiren.info/buddhism/lotussutra/text/chap20.html>

¹⁴ ¹⁵ ²⁰ ²⁷ ²⁸ ²⁹ ³⁰ ³¹ ³² ³³ ³⁴ What Can We Learn From Bodhisattva Never Disparaging? - World Tribune

<https://www.worldtribune.org/2020/what-can-we-learn-from-bodhisattva-never-disparaging/>

²¹ ²² ²⁶ ³⁹ Bodily Reading | 500 Yojanas

<https://www.500yojanas.org/bodily-reading/>

²³ ²⁴ Gosho: Letter to Priest Nichiro in Prison

<http://nichiren.info/gosho/LetterPriestNichiro.htm>

³⁵ ³⁶ ³⁷ Key Passages From The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings (Part 2) - World Tribune

<https://www.worldtribune.org/2023/key-passages-from-the-record-of-the-orally-transmitted-teachings-part-2/>

⁴⁰ “The Teacher of the Law” chapter: sixteen important points | OTT

<https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/ott/PART-1/10>