

Maitreya's Questions in the Lotus Sūtra: Commentary and Interpretations Across Traditions

Context of Maitreya's Question in the Lotus Sūtra (Chapter 15)

In Chapter 15, "Emerging from the Earth," of the *Lotus Sūtra*, an awe-inspiring scene unfolds: innumerable bodhisattvas suddenly spring forth from beneath the earth and fill the sky before the Buddha. These are radiant bodhisattvas "as numerous as the sands of countless Ganges Rivers," led by four great leaders, who had never been seen before by anyone in the assembly 1 2. Bodhisattva Maitreya (the future Buddha) and the others are astonished at this unprecedented sight. Speaking on behalf of the assembly, Maitreya respectfully asks Shakyamuni Buddha who these mysterious bodhisattvas are and *how* they could have trained to such advanced stages under Shakyamuni's guidance in such a short time 3 4. In prose and in verse, Maitreya articulates the dilemma: Shakyamuni attained enlightenment only recently (historically about forty years ago), yet these earth-emerging bodhisattvas appear to have been practicing for eons. He even uses an analogy – **as absurd as a 25-year-old man claiming to be father to a 100-year-old** – to express how unbelievable it seems that Shakyamuni could have "*taught and converted an immeasurable...number of great bodhisattvas*" in so little time 5 6. Maitreya's pressing question, chanted in verse, asks in summary: "**How in such a short time did you teach these innumerable bodhisattvas, cause them to aspire to enlightenment, and establish them in non-retrogression?**" 7. This poignant inquiry captures the assembly's genuine confusion – *not* in disbelief of the Buddha, but in recognition that something profound lies behind this mystery.

Buddha's Response and the Revelation of Eternal Buddhahood

Shakyamuni's answer to Maitreya's question comes in the next chapter (Chapter 16, "The Life Span of the Tathāgata"), and it reshapes the very understanding of his identity. First, the Buddha confirms that **these countless bodhisattvas are indeed his own disciples** – ones he "**has been teaching and converting since the distant past**" 8. This startling statement challenges the assembly's prior assumptions and prompts even deeper doubt, paving the way for a groundbreaking revelation. Seeing the assembly's perplexity, Shakyamuni proceeds to reveal that his enlightenment was not attained merely 40-odd years ago under the Bodhi tree, but in fact **countless eons (kalpas) in the past** 9. In other words, the Buddha discloses his true, eternal nature: he has actually been enlightened for an unimaginably long time and has been continuously teaching beings all along. This is the famed revelation of the Buddha's *immeasurable lifespan*. By explaining that he has "**ever since the long distant past**" been guiding these bodhisattvas 10 5, Shakyamuni resolves Maitreya's question without resorting to a mere miracle. The text pointedly *rejects* the idea that the Buddha simply used a sudden feat of supernatural power to train them overnight; instead it asserts a grander truth – that Shakyamuni's Buddhahood transcends the conventional timeline 11. This teaching elevates Shakyamuni's status in Mahāyāna Buddhism as the "**Original Buddha**" whose enlightened work is timeless. In narrative terms, Maitreya's earnest questioning is the device that prompts the Buddha to unveil this deepest level of truth 8. Thus, the *Lotus Sūtra* positions Shakyamuni as an ever-

abiding teacher with an infinite past, which also subtly repositions Maitreya (the *future* Buddha) as still a learner in the present assembly, awed by Shakyamuni's true greatness.

Faith and the Importance of Questioning

One notable aspect of this episode is how it models the Buddhist approach to faith and inquiry. Despite their astonishment, **Maitreya and the bodhisattvas do not reject Shakyamuni's words; instead, they respond with faith and healthy skepticism.** Maitreya prefaces his query by affirming the assembly's trust in the Buddha – they believe the Buddha's wisdom is true and "never false" ¹². However, he candidly admits that the scenario is hard to grasp and, for the sake of future followers who might harbor doubts, he beseeches the Buddha to clarify the matter fully ¹² ⁷. In the sutra, the bodhisattvas even state "**We ourselves have faith in the Buddha... Nevertheless, in the age after the Buddha has passed, if newcomers hear this they may not believe it... so we beg you to explain and dispel our doubts**" ¹². Far from being offended, Shakyamuni warmly praises Maitreya's question, calling it "excellent" that he asked about this profound issue ¹³. The Buddha **does not demand blind obedience**; instead, he welcomes sincere questions as a means to deeper understanding. Commentators highlight this dynamic as a lesson that Buddhist faith is not passive acceptance but an active engagement of one's whole being – including a critical mind – in pursuit of truth ⁸ ¹². Maitreya's respectful yet persistent questioning exemplifies how disciples should approach profound teachings: with reverence, trust, and the courage to admit confusion and seek clarification. This balance ensures that faith is bolstered by understanding, leading to insight rather than doubt. Indeed, the *Lotus Sūtra* suggests that only by resolving such doubts can one attain unshakable peace. The Buddha's response – patiently revealing a deeper truth to dispel the confusion – shows the compassionate pedagogy at the heart of Mahāyāna: guiding followers to enlightenment through dialogue and explanation, not through coercion or mere mystique.

Tiantai (T'ien-t'ai) Interpretation: The "Original" Buddha and the Middle Way

Chinese Tiantai scholars (6th century) like **Zhiyi** provided influential commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra*, offering both literal and profound symbolic interpretations of Maitreya's vision. Zhiyi identified Chapter 15 ("Emerging from the Earth") as the **beginning of the "essential teaching"** of the *Lotus Sūtra*, where Shakyamuni reveals his original enlightenment in the remote past ¹⁴ ¹⁵. In Tiantai exegesis, the multitudes of bodhisattvas emerging from beneath the earth are understood as the Buddha's original disciples from *time without beginning*, underscoring Shakyamuni's status as the **primordial Buddha**. Zhiyi went further to interpret the very image of the bodhisattvas' **dwelling "under the earth" in a figurative, doctrinal sense**. According to Zhiyi's commentary *Fahua Wenju* (*Words and Phrases of the Lotus*), "underneath the saha world" symbolizes the realm of ultimate reality or "**the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light.**" This is a poetic reference to Nirvana's four virtues (eternity, happiness, true self, and purity) ¹⁶. In other words, these bodhisattvas abide in the *fundamental ground of truth (Dharma-nature)* – an ever-present reality beneath the surface of the ordinary world. Zhiyi explains that "*underneath... is none other than the middle way*," implying that the bodhisattvas dwell in the profound emptiness or thusness that underlies all phenomena ¹⁶. This interpretation teaches that the bodhisattvas' emergence "from the earth" is not literally from dirt below; rather, it signifies them arising from the deep **ground of Dharma**. Their sudden appearance represents how the ultimate truth, though hidden from mundane view, can manifest when the Buddha's true teaching is revealed. Additionally, Tiantai classifies all prior chapters (1–14) as the "trace teaching," where Shakyamuni taught as the *historical* Buddha, whereas in chapter 15 onward (the "essential

teaching") he speaks as the *original, eternal* Buddha ¹⁷. Maitreya's bafflement is thus a narrative pivot: it sets the stage for Shakyamuni to disclose the *Middle Way reality of his Buddha-hood*, reconciling the apparent contradiction of a short-lived Buddha instructing ageless bodhisattvas. In summary, Tiantai commentators see Maitreya's question as the sutra's way of guiding readers from a superficial view of the Buddha's life to an enlightened understanding that **the Buddha's compassion and teaching activity are timeless** – rooted in the very fabric of absolute reality.

Nichiren's Interpretation: Bodhisattvas of the Earth and Their Mission

The Lotus Sūtra's vision of the earth-emerging bodhisattvas took on urgent, concrete meaning in **Nichiren Buddhism** (Japan, 13th century). Nichiren Daishonin, a devotee of the Lotus Sūtra, placed Chapter 15 at the core of his doctrine, identifying these bodhisattvas with a vital mission in the present age. In Nichiren's interpretation, Shakyamuni Buddha's statement that "*I have been teaching these bodhisattvas since the remotest past*" is taken as literal truth – proof that Shakyamuni is the **Eternal Buddha** who enlightened an infinite time ago and personally trained the Bodhisattvas of the Earth ¹⁸ ¹⁹. Nichiren aligns closely with Tiantai on this point, referring to Shakyamuni in Chapter 15-16 as "the Buddha in his true identity" (as opposed to the transient, historical appearance) ¹⁹. Where Nichiren's view becomes distinctive is in **who** these bodhisattvas are in relation to our current world. He taught that **the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are the very practitioners who embrace and propagate the Lotus Sūtra in the present era** (which Nichiren called the Latter Day of the Law) ¹⁹ ²⁰. Citing the *Lotus* and Tiantai's doctrines, Nichiren held that only these bodhisattvas of the essential teaching were entrusted with the ultimate Law. In his own writings – for example, in *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings* – Nichiren boldly declares: "*Nichiren and his followers... are all followers of these bodhisattvas who emerged from the earth.*" ²⁰. He identifies himself and his disciples as the reincarnation or continuations of those very Bodhisattvas led by Superior Practices, entrusted by Shakyamuni to spread the correct teaching in a troubled world. This was not mere metaphor; Nichiren saw it as his movement's divine mandate. Moreover, Nichiren taught that the **practice** carried out by these bodhisattvas is the chanting of the Lotus Sūtra's title (Nam-myoho-renge-kyo), which he described as the essence of the sutra's teaching ²¹ ²². By chanting and teaching this Law, Nichiren's followers fulfill the vow of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth to "*lead and guide all living beings*" to enlightenment in the current age ²³ ²⁴. In this perspective, Maitreya's question and Shakyamuni's answer carry a profoundly inspirational message: they imply that even in an era long after the historical Buddha's passing, there exists a group of awakened Bodhisattvas (now manifest as ordinary people) who have long been trained by the Eternal Buddha and who will compassionately carry on the mission of universal salvation ¹⁹ ²⁰. Nichiren thus reads the Lotus Sūtra as directly speaking to his own time. For Nichiren Buddhists, Maitreya's astonishment underscores how truly extraordinary the Lotus Sūtra's "**essential teaching**" is – even great bodhisattvas like Maitreya had not heard it before. This galvanizes their faith that by upholding this supreme teaching, they are connecting with the Eternal Buddha's own disciples and work. In summary, the Nichiren tradition honors Maitreya's questions as the catalyst for revealing the eternal lineage of mentor and disciples, and it embraces the role of Bodhisattvas of the Earth as an active, present reality. It teaches that we, too, can be part of that enlightened assembly by dedicating ourselves to the sutra's practice and compassionate propagation ²³ ²⁰.

Symbolic Readings: Inherent Enlightenment and the Inner Buddha Nature

Beyond doctrinal analysis, Buddhist teachers across different schools have also offered **symbolic or allegorical interpretations** of Maitreya's vision to glean lessons for spiritual practice. A common thread in many interpretations (particularly in Zen-influenced perspectives) is that the drama of the bodhisattvas emerging from the earth highlights the principle that **enlightenment and the Dharma are inherent in this world and within ourselves**, rather than arriving from an external realm. For example, Zen Master Dōgen regarded the Lotus Sūtra highly, and later Zen commentators have echoed its themes. A Zen commentary notes that Shakyamuni's choice to decline the help of celestial bodhisattvas in favor of those "hidden" in the earth can be seen as "**strengthening the view that Dharma is inherent in all things and [that] Buddha Nature [exists] in all beings.**"²⁵ In this reading, the **earth** from which the bodhisattvas spring is symbolic of the ordinary, everyday world – *this* saha world with all its suffering – which nevertheless contains limitless potential for wisdom and compassion. The great host of bodhisattvas emerging from the ground suggests that the capacity for Buddhahood pervades even the most humble soil of samsaric life. One Zen teaching illustrates this with an aphorism: "**The treasures of the house do not come in through the front gate.**"²⁶ In context, this means that the most precious treasure – enlightenment – is not something that enters our life from outside, but arises from within the "house" of our own life. We need not look to a far-off heaven for saviors; the "saviors" (the bodhisattvas) are nurtured in the depths of our own world. Some modern interpreters even view the episode as implying a kind of *spiritual ecology*: **the earth itself, and all reality, is already suffused with the Buddha's wisdom, poised to assist all beings**²⁷. In other words, **Buddha-nature is the ground of our being**, and when the conditions are right (as when the Buddha calls them forth in the assembly), the bodhisattva qualities inherent in life will burst forth in full force. This allegorical angle harmonizes with the Mahāyāna teaching of **innate enlightenment (hongaku)** – the idea that we are originally enlightened, and practice simply brings out what is already present. From this standpoint, Maitreya's bewilderment can represent the unenlightened mind encountering the miraculous emergence of its own inherent Buddha-nature for the first time. The Buddha's revelation then assures us that this phenomenon is trustworthy and rooted in an eternal truth. Teachers in Pure Land and other devotional traditions have also drawn inspiration from Chapter 15. Some see in it a call to **devotion and personal responsibility**: since the bodhisattvas who will spread the Dharma are already here among us, each believer should strive to emulate their example. We are encouraged to "bring forth" the bodhisattva from the earth of our own hearts by studying and chanting the Lotus Sūtra, thereby activating the Buddha's timeless guidance in our lives^{28 29}. In sum, symbolic interpretations – across Zen, modernist, and other Mahāyāna outlooks – converge on the uplifting message that *the potential for enlightenment is not distant or limited by time*. The Lotus Sūtra uses Maitreya's sincere doubt and the wondrous appearance of these bodhisattvas to illustrate that the **Dharma has been here all along**, at the very ground of reality, waiting to emerge. This encourages practitioners to seek enlightenment not as something foreign to their nature, but as the blooming of seeds planted long ago by the Buddha in the soil of their own lives.

Conclusion

Maitreya's questions in the Lotus Sūtra have resonated through centuries of Buddhist thought, prompting rich commentary in different traditions. In the sutra's narrative, his earnest inquiry is the key that unlocks one of Mahāyāna Buddhism's deepest revelations: the Buddha's enlightenment is infinite, and his true disciples are boundless in number and origin. **Tiantai** masters like Zhiyi highlighted the doctrinal

significance of this scene, interpreting it as the transition from the **temporary** to the **original** Buddha and using cosmology and philosophical insight to explain the bodhisattvas' mysterious origin [16](#) [18](#). **Nichiren** went further to locate this drama in present reality, teaching that the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are here and now – that he and his followers themselves carry on the mission bestowed by the Eternal Shakyamuni [19](#) [20](#). Other **Mahayana teachers**, including those in the Zen tradition, found in Maitreya's astonishment a powerful metaphor for inherent enlightenment and the omnipresence of Buddha-nature [25](#). Despite varying emphases, these interpretations do not conflict so much as illuminate different facets of the story. They all acknowledge, in one way or another, that Maitreya's respectful challenge was indispensable for revealing the truth. Instead of blind faith, the bodhisattva's questions exemplified a *fusion of faith and understanding* – demonstrating that even devout followers must confront confusion head-on to attain clarity [12](#). The Buddha's compassionate response – offering a profound explanation rather than a rebuke – reassures devotees that Buddhism invites inquiry and **deepens faith through wisdom** [12](#) [13](#). In the end, Maitreya's role in the *Lotus Sūtra* is a reminder that true understanding often begins with a question. Each tradition's commentary, from scholarly exegesis to allegorical lessons, invites us to ponder the meaning of this episode in our own practice. Are we, too, prepared to ask the urgent questions about the Dharma that lead to a greater revelation? The *Lotus Sūtra*'s answer – delivered to Maitreya but intended for all – is that the Buddha's guiding presence is far more enduring and far-reaching than our ordinary eyes can see. By maintaining faith while courageously seeking understanding, we become receptive to that timeless guidance. Thus, the innumerable bodhisattvas emerging from the earth can be seen as both a literal *Mahāyāna* miracle and a powerful metaphor for the awakening of innumerable Bodhisattva-hearted beings in every age, encouraged by the Buddha who "**has been teaching and converting this multitude**" from the very start [10](#).

Sources

- The *Lotus Sūtra*, Chapter 15 ("Emerging from the Earth") and Chapter 16 ("The Life Span of the Tathāgata"), translated in **Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sutra* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1993)** – see especially Maitreya's questions and the Buddha's response [5](#) [12](#) [7](#).
- **Nichiren Daishonin**, *The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings*, trans. Burton Watson (SGI, 2004), pp. 116-119 – Nichiren's commentary on Chapter 15, identifying the Bodhisattvas of the Earth as those taught by the true Buddha and as the teachers of the Latter Day [19](#) [20](#).
- **Daisaku Ikeda**, "Lecture on 'Emerging from the Earth' Chapter," *Daibyakurenge* (Aug. 2023) – discusses the mentor-disciple bond and Nichiren's disciples as Bodhisattvas of the Earth [21](#) [24](#).
- **Stephen F. Teiser & Jacqueline I. Stone (eds.)**, *Readings of the Lotus Sutra* (Columbia Univ. Press, 2009) – includes analysis of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s narrative and its reception in Tiantai and Nichiren Buddhism [9](#) [16](#).
- **Martin Goodson**, "Bodhisattvas of the Earth: The Way of Devotion," *The Zen Gateway* (Jan. 24, 2022) – a Zen perspective emphasizing inherent Buddha-nature and the symbolic meaning of the bodhisattvas emerging from within this world [25](#) [27](#).
- **Yoshiro Tamura**, *Introduction to the Lotus Sutra* (Wisdom Publications, 2014) – provides historical context and insight into the *Lotus Sūtra*'s themes, including the eternity of the Buddha and the role of Bodhisattva Maitreya [4](#). (Tamura notes how the sutra uses Maitreya's doubts to introduce the concept of Shakyamuni's immeasurable life span.)

In compiling the above, connected sources such as the BDK English *Lotus Sutra*, the Nichiren Buddhist Library translations, and scholarly analyses were used to ensure accuracy [5](#) [18](#) [25](#). These provide a multi-faceted commentary on Maitreya's questions as understood in different Buddhist traditions. Each

perspective enriches our appreciation of the Lotus Sūtra's teaching that the path to enlightenment is both timeless and immediately accessible.

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