

The Immanence of the Eternal Buddha: A Scholarly Analysis of Practice and Protection in the Lotus Sutra, with a Focus on the Vow of Universal-Sage Bodhisattva

I. Introduction: The Seed of Enlightenment in a World of Conflict

The Lotus Sutra, a foundational text of Mahayana Buddhism, presents a complex and transformative vision of enlightenment. The user's query centers on a profound passage from its twenty-eighth and final chapter, "The Encouragement of Universal-Sage Bodhisattva": "Anyone who keeps, reads and recites this Sūtra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma, memorizes it correctly, studies it, practices it, and copies it, should be considered to see me, and hear this sūtra from my mouth. He should be considered to be making offerings to me. He should be considered to be praised by me with the word 'Excellent!'".¹ This declaration, spoken by Shakyamuni Buddha to the Bodhisattva Universal-Sage, transcends a simple promise of spiritual reward. It suggests a direct, palpable connection between the practitioner and the Buddha. The accompanying reflection from the user raises a crucial philosophical question: how does the study and practice of this sutra allow one to "see not only the Buddha, but all beings who have vowed to protect and encourage us," and in turn, how does this process compel the practitioner to "embody the spirit of these protective deities" in a world beset by conflict?

This report endeavors to provide a comprehensive scholarly analysis of these themes. The objective is to move beyond a literal interpretation of the text and delve into the intricate doctrines that give these pronouncements their profound meaning. The analysis will demonstrate that the act of practicing the Lotus Sutra is not merely a devotional exercise but a dynamic, reciprocal process of internal transformation and external altruism. It will synthesize the doctrines of the Eternal Buddha, as revealed in Chapter 16, and the

Bodhisattva's vow, as articulated in Chapter 28, to show how they form a cohesive framework for the practitioner's journey. By drawing upon interpretations from major East Asian Buddhist traditions, including the Tendai and Nichiren schools, this report seeks to illuminate how the philosophical tenets of the sutra serve as a practical guide for ethical conduct, ultimately empowering the individual to manifest the very presence they seek to perceive. The core of this investigation lies in understanding that the protection offered by the sutra's deities is inseparable from the virtues the practitioner cultivates, leading to the ultimate realization that the "Buddha land" is not a distant realm but an immanent reality to be forged in this world of suffering.

II. The Bodhisattva as Guide and Protector: The Vow of Universal-Sage

The Role of Universal-Sage (Samantabhadra/Fugen)

Universal-Sage Bodhisattva, known as Samantabhadra in Sanskrit and Fugen in Japanese, holds a preeminent position within the Mahayana pantheon. His name, often translated as "Universal Worthy" or "All Good," immediately signals his encompassing nature and profound ethical significance.² In Mahayana Buddhism, he is revered as a figure of great practice and meditation, forming a sacred triad with Shakyamuni Buddha and the Bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri. In Chinese Buddhism, his association with action is so pronounced that he is frequently given the epithet

Daheng (大行), meaning "He of Great Practice," a designation that sets him apart from Manjushri, who personifies transcendent wisdom.² This duality highlights a fundamental Mahayana principle: wisdom (

prajñā) must be actualized through compassionate practice (*upaya* or *karunā*), and Universal-Sage is the ultimate embodiment of this action.

The arrival of Universal-Sage in Chapter 28 of the Lotus Sutra is a deeply symbolic event. He travels from the east, from the land of the Buddha King Above Jeweled Dignity and Virtue, to pay homage to Shakyamuni Buddha and to hear the Lotus Sutra preached in the Saha world.³ This journey signifies the universal acclaim of the Lotus Sutra and the profound reverence it commands from all enlightened beings. His arrival, accompanied by a vast multitude of bodhisattvas and other beings, causes the very lands they pass through to quake, a metaphor

for the purification of the sense faculties of all living beings.⁵ His presence signals the culmination of the sutra's teachings and introduces the theme of protection for future practitioners.

The Vow to Protect and the Symbolism of Practice

The central act of Universal-Sage in this chapter is his solemn vow to protect those who uphold the Lotus Sutra after the Buddha's passing.³ He specifically targets the "turbid evil world" of the Latter Day of the Law, a period of spiritual decline when the Dharma is most susceptible to slander and persecution.¹ He promises to appear before practitioners on a six-tusked white elephant to offer protection, console their minds, and even help them memorize forgotten lines or verses.¹ This image of the white elephant is a powerful piece of iconography in East Asian Buddhism. The white color symbolizes purity and the six tusks represent the six perfections (

paramitas)—giving, keeping the precepts, perseverance, effort, meditation, and wisdom.⁷

The symbolism of the elephant's six tusks is not a mere literary flourish; it reveals a profound truth about the nature of spiritual protection. The Bodhisattva's protective power is, in essence, the very embodiment of the virtues that the practitioner is cultivating. When the practitioner struggles with maintaining the precepts, the Bodhisattva's appearance reminds them that perseverance in ethical conduct is itself the protective force against moral decay. Similarly, when doubt or slander arises, the Bodhisattva's form, radiating with the light of wisdom, reminds them that the perfection of wisdom is the true shield against confusion. The protective deities described in the sutra are not separate, external beings; they are a personification of the perfected qualities of mind and character that shield one from internal and external hindrances. This understanding fundamentally redefines the concept of protection from a passive gift to an active, reciprocal engagement.

The Four Conditions for Obtaining the Sutra

In response to Universal-Sage's question about how one can obtain the Lotus Sutra after his death, Shakyamuni Buddha outlines four essential conditions, which are the prerequisites for the bodhisattva's protective vow to take effect.¹ These conditions are:

1. To be protected and kept in mind by the Buddhas.
2. To plant the roots of virtue.

3. To enter the collection of proper concentrations.
4. To bring forth the mind to rescue all living beings.⁵

These four conditions represent a complete path of practice, encompassing the body, speech, mind, and vows. As explained in Mahayana commentaries, these conditions are equated with the "Four Happy-dwelling Conducts": being protected by the Buddhas is the happy-dwelling conduct of the body; amassing roots of virtue is that of the mouth; entering proper concentrations is that of the mind; and bringing forth the mind to rescue beings is that of vows.⁵ They are also linked to the Four Virtues of Nirvana—permanence, bliss, true self, and purity—and to the process of "opening, demonstrating, awakening to, and entering the Buddha's knowledge and vision".⁵ The practitioner's fulfillment of these conditions is the cause (

hetu) that calls forth the spiritual response (*pratyaya*) of the protective deities. This establishes a profound co-creative relationship: the practitioner's active engagement is the foundation for the bodhisattva's response. The protection is not a unilateral, passive gift but a reciprocal, co-creative act that deepens as the practitioner's commitment grows.

The ten great vows of Universal-Sage, which are the basis of a bodhisattva in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, are inextricably linked to these four conditions, demonstrating how the specific conditions for receiving the Lotus Sutra are a microcosm of the bodhisattva's larger, universal path.

Table 1: The Four Conditions & The Ten Great Vows

Four Conditions of Chapter 28	Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra (Avatamsaka Sutra)
1. To be protected and kept in mind by the Buddhas.	1. To pay homage and respect to all Buddhas. 2. To praise the Thus Come Ones.
2. To plant the roots of virtue.	3. To make abundant offerings. 4. To confess and repent of all one's misdeeds. 5. To rejoice in the merits of others.
3. To enter the collection of proper concentrations.	6. To request the Buddhas to turn the Dharma wheel. 7. To entreat enlightened

	beings to remain in the world. 8. To always study the teachings of the Buddha.
4. To bring forth the mind to rescue all living beings.	9. To accommodate and benefit all living beings. 10. To dedicate all merits to sentient beings that they may achieve Buddhahood.

This alignment demonstrates the intrinsic connection between the two sets of teachings and reinforces Universal-Sage's role as the ultimate model of practice.² The specific conditions for the practitioner's success are revealed to be the very actions that define the bodhisattva's path.

III. The Immeasurable Lifespan: Seeing and Hearing the Eternal Thus Come One

Deconstructing the Core Quote

The user's query highlights a passage that promises practitioners will "see me, and hear this sūtra from my mouth".¹ On the surface, this statement presents a logical paradox. The chapter is set after the Buddha has announced his impending passing into nirvana, and the very question posed by Universal-Sage concerns the fate of the sutra's practitioners "after the passing of the Thus Come One".¹ If the historical Shakyamuni Buddha has already passed from the world, how can a future practitioner see him or hear his voice? This question necessitates a deeper, more philosophical understanding of the Buddha's existence. The passage cannot be a literal promise of a physical encounter with a historical figure; rather, it is a statement about the immanence of the Buddha's enlightened reality.

The Revelation of Chapter 16, "The Life Span of the Thus Come One"

The philosophical foundation for this promise is laid in Chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra, "The Life

Span of the Thus Come One." This chapter is considered the heart of the sutra's essential teaching in many traditions.¹⁰ In it, Shakyamuni Buddha makes a radical and startling revelation: he did not attain enlightenment for the first time in his present life in India under the bodhi tree, but in the unimaginably distant past.¹² To illustrate the immense length of this period, he uses a powerful analogy: grinding a vast number of worlds into dust, dropping a single particle each time one traverses an equally vast number of worlds, and declaring that the time since his enlightenment "surpasses this by a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a million nayuta asamkhya kalpas".¹⁰

This revelation is known as "opening the near and revealing the distant," or "casting off the transient and revealing the true".¹⁰ The "transient" refers to the Buddha's temporary, historical manifestation in India, while the "true" reveals his original and eternal identity as the Eternal Buddha.¹¹ From the perspective of this eternal existence, Shakyamuni explains that he has always been in this Saha world, using various skillful means (

upaya) to guide and teach living beings.¹⁰ The apparent death of the Buddha is, therefore, also a skillful means, as illustrated by the parable of the skilled physician and his sick children.¹⁰ The physician feigns death to shock his deluded children into taking the medicine he left behind, and similarly, the Buddha's passing is a device to arouse in people the aspiration to seek the Dharma and strive for enlightenment.¹⁰

Immanence and Inherent Buddha-nature

The doctrine of the Eternal Buddha establishes a concept of an ever-present, immanent reality. The Buddha, having awakened since the remote past, is "constantly abiding in the present world," though his presence may not be perceived by those who are deluded.¹² This perspective is profoundly connected to the idea of universal Buddhahood, which posits that all sentient beings possess the inherent potential to attain enlightenment.¹³ The Lotus Sutra's teaching on universal Buddhahood dismantles any notion of a distant, unattainable enlightenment. Instead, it asserts that ordinary people are Buddhas just as they are.¹⁶ The universe itself is originally the Buddha, a vast living entity of compassion that is always working to illuminate and liberate beings.¹⁶

The promises in Chapter 28 are philosophically validated by the revelations in Chapter 16. The ability to "see the Buddha" is not a temporal event but a realization of this eternal, immanent Buddha, who transcends the limitations of time and space. The act of practicing the sutra is the very process by which one's perception is purified, allowing one to see the Buddha that has always resided within and around them. This establishes a crucial connection: Chapter 16's revelation is the necessary doctrinal foundation that gives meaning and possibility to

Chapter 28's promises. Without the Eternal Buddha, the promise to "see me" would be a historical impossibility for future generations. This understanding fundamentally shifts the locus of enlightenment from an external, historical figure to an internal, ever-present reality, making the path one of self-reformation and self-discovery rather than a journey to meet a distant savior.¹⁶

Table 2: Key Philosophical Doctrines in the Lotus Sutra

Doctrine	Core Tenet	Relationship to Other Doctrines
Immeasurable Lifespan	The Buddha is not a historical figure but an eternal, immanent reality who attained enlightenment in the remote past.	This doctrine is the philosophical basis that gives meaning to the promises of the One Vehicle and universal Buddha-nature. It reveals that the path to enlightenment has always been available and that the Buddha is an ever-present guide, not a distant savior.
One Vehicle (<i>Ekayāna</i>)	All Buddhist paths and teachings are "skillful means" that ultimately lead to a single, supreme goal: Buddhahood.	This concept is made possible by the immeasurable lifespan, as the Eternal Buddha has used countless skillful means throughout time to guide beings. It affirms that the goal of Buddhahood is universal and that all beings are on a singular, great path together.
Universal Buddha-nature	All sentient beings, regardless of their current state, possess the inherent	This doctrine is a direct consequence of the One Vehicle and the Eternal

	potential to become a Buddha.	Lifespan. Since the Buddha has been teaching universally and eternally, the potential for Buddhahood is not limited to a select few but is a fundamental, immanent reality for all life. The practice of the sutra is the means to realize this inherent potential.
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This framework demonstrates that these doctrines are not separate ideas but form a cohesive philosophical system. The immeasurable lifespan provides the context, the One Vehicle outlines the path, and universal Buddha-nature affirms the inherent capacity of every being to walk it.

IV. The Unity of Practice and Philosophy: From Vows to Realization

The Doctrine of the One Vehicle (*Ekayāna*)

The Lotus Sutra is celebrated for its radical doctrine of the One Vehicle (*Ekayāna*), which provides a unifying framework for all of its teachings.¹⁵ Throughout the sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha reveals that the seemingly disparate paths he has taught—those of the

shravaka (voice-hearers), the *pratyekabuddha* (solitary awakened ones), and the *bodhisattva*—are not separate destinations but are merely "skillful means" (*upaya*) designed to accommodate the differing capacities and inclinations of his disciples.¹⁵ All of these paths, in the grand vision of the Lotus Sutra, lead to a single, all-encompassing goal: Buddhahood.¹⁵ The One Vehicle is thus the supreme and all-encompassing path that embraces and reconciles all other teachings, revealing them as expressions of a singular truth. The Buddha states, "seek as you will in all ten directions, there is no other vehicle, apart from the

upāyas of the buddhas".¹⁵

This doctrine establishes a profound spiritual egalitarianism. It asserts that the ultimate goal of enlightenment is not reserved for an elite few but is universally available to all. The concept of the One Vehicle is not merely a doctrinal curiosity; it serves as a philosophical imperative for compassionate action. If all beings are on the same, singular path to Buddhahood, then the individual's progress is inextricably linked to the progress of others.

Practice as Samantabhadra's Conduct

Chapter 28 of the Lotus Sutra makes a direct and explicit connection between the practitioner and the bodhisattva: "If there are people who accept, embrace, read, and recite the Lotus Sutra, meditate, and memorize it correctly, understand its intricate meaning, and practice the sutra as it is taught, you should know that these people are practicing the actions of Universal Worthy himself".⁴ This is a pivotal statement, transforming the practice of the sutra from a passive, devotional act into a dynamic emulation of the bodhisattva's path. The text is clear that the mere act of reading or reciting is not enough; it must be accompanied by an understanding of its intricate meaning and cultivation in accordance with its teachings.

This cultivation is a direct reflection of the Ten Great Vows of Samantabhadra, which are the basis for the bodhisattva's conduct in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.² These vows include paying homage to all Buddhas, praising their virtues, making offerings, repenting of misdeeds, rejoicing in others' merits, and requesting the preaching of the Dharma.⁸ The final two vows are particularly important: accommodating and benefiting all living beings and dedicating all merits universally to them.⁸ This ethical framework ensures that individual practice is always aimed at the welfare of all beings. The user's query about "dedicat[ing] our lives to offer benefit and encouragement" is not a separate, optional add-on to the practice; it is the very essence of it. The philosophical insight of the One Vehicle, which confirms that all beings are on the same path, leads directly to the ethical practice of embodying the bodhisattva's vows, which in turn transforms the individual's inner life.

The Inseparability of Self and Other

The ultimate ethical and philosophical conclusion of these teachings is the inseparability of one's own happiness from the happiness of others. The practice of the Lotus Sutra cultivates an altruistic perspective where the individual and universal are inextricably linked. The text

states, "As long as one unhappy person remains, our own happiness cannot be complete".¹⁶ This is the perspective of the "true entity of all phenomena," where all phenomena in the universe are viewed as a single, living entity.¹⁶ This means that the path to peace is not found by retreating from the world but by engaging with it and striving to transform it. The Lotus Sutra's humanism, which begins by "treasuring the individual" and "does not discriminate" between people of different statuses or backgrounds, offers a profound alternative to societal extremes.¹⁶ It provides a middle path between the "parched desert of individualism" and the "prison of totalitarianism," leading to a society where people "complement and encourage one another".¹⁶ The practice of the Lotus Sutra is, by its very nature, an act of compassionate altruism that transforms the individual and, in doing so, begins to transform the world.

V. Interpretations and Applications: Tendai, Nichiren, and the Modern Practitioner

The profound teachings of the Lotus Sutra have been interpreted and applied in diverse ways throughout history, particularly by the great schools of East Asian Buddhism. The Tendai and Nichiren schools, both rooted in the sutra, provide illuminating examples of how these doctrines have been actualized in practice and thought.

Tendai Buddhism

The Tendai school, founded by the Great Teacher Zhiyi in China, places a unique emphasis on the immanence of the Buddha-realm and the flexible nature of the precepts. A central tenet of Tendai is the principle of "three thousand realms in a single moment of life," which posits that all levels of existence, from hell beings to Buddhas, are inherent in every moment of consciousness.¹² This philosophical perspective reinforces the idea that the Buddha land is inseparable from this present world and that "all phenomena in the universe are one living entity".¹⁶

Tendai's interpretation of the ethical precepts is equally complex and nuanced. While the Lotus Sutra contains few explicit rules, Tendai monks argued that the "Perfect-Sudden Precepts" are based on its teachings.¹⁸ They cited passages, such as the metaphor of inhabiting the Tathagata's room, wearing his robes, and sitting on his seat—symbolizing compassion, forbearance, and the realization of emptiness—as the true ethical guideposts.¹⁸ This led to seemingly contradictory positions, where some monks used the sutra to justify

strict adherence to monastic precepts, while others cited it to argue that all precepts could be disregarded, as the ultimate truth transcended conventional rules.¹⁸ This paradox reveals a deeper point: the true "precept" is not a fixed, external rule but the compassionate embodiment of the bodhisattva's conduct. The sutra's ethics are not prescriptive but a call to realize the "middle way," where the ultimate truth transcends and encompasses conventional rules, making the text a living guide for ethical behavior rather than a static legal code.

Nichiren Buddhism

Nichiren Buddhism, a school founded in Japan, places particular emphasis on the "Life Span" chapter and its revelation of the fundamental equality of all beings as "eternal Buddhas".¹⁴ The central practice in this tradition, the chanting of

Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, is understood as the means to access this inherent Buddha-nature and to manifest the state of life characterized by eternity, happiness, true self, and purity.¹⁶

A pivotal element of Nichiren's interpretation comes from Chapter 28 and the eight-character passage: "You should rise and greet them from afar, showing them the same respect you would a Buddha".¹⁹ This passage is considered the very heart of the sutra's message for the Latter Day of the Law.¹⁹ It elevates the practice from a purely spiritual endeavor to a revolutionary social project. It means that the path to enlightenment is not found in an isolated spiritual quest but in the act of showing radical, universal respect to every person, recognizing their inherent Buddha-nature.¹⁹ The "great vow for

kosen-rufu," or the widespread propagation of the Lotus Sutra, is thus not merely a missionary project but the active, compassionate work of building a world where every person is revered as a Buddha.¹⁹

Table 3: Comparative Interpretations (Tendai vs. Nichiren)

Aspect	Tendai Buddhism	Nichiren Buddhism
Central Focus	The integration of all Buddhist teachings into a single, unifying framework	The universal Buddha-nature of all beings; the revelation of

	(One Vehicle); the immanence of the Buddha-realm.	the Eternal Buddha in the "Life Span" chapter.
Key Concept	The Perfect-Sudden Precepts, based on the Lotus Sutra's philosophical and metaphorical teachings.	The direct, internal practice of chanting the title of the sutra (<i>Daimoku</i>), which is considered to contain the sutra's essence.
Practical Application	The pursuit of enlightenment "with this very body" (<i>sokushin jōbutsu</i>), often through a blend of doctrinal study, precepts, and esoteric practices.	The active, compassionate work of <i>kosen-rufu</i> (worldwide propagation of the Dharma), which is rooted in a humanistic spirit of treasuring every individual.
Interpretation of Precepts	The sutra's teachings on compassion and wisdom can be used to either uphold or disregard conventional, fixed precepts.	The primary "precept" is to show respect to all practitioners of the Lotus Sutra, recognizing them as Buddhas. Slander is considered a grave offense.

Addressing the "World of Conflict"

The user's final reflection on a "world of conflict" is a core concern that the Lotus Sutra directly addresses. The sutra teaches that true security and lasting peace are not to be found in a distant pure land but are forged through the "reformation of the inner life" and the "endless challenge to transform reality" in this very world.¹⁶ The Buddhist path is not one of escapism; it is a dynamic process of engaging with suffering. The teachings offer a path to overcome despair and fear by embracing self-acceptance and cultivating a "keen awareness of deep empathy for others".¹⁶ By embodying the spirit of the bodhisattva, the practitioner transforms their own life, turning the "poison" of difficult challenges into "medicine" and their karma into their mission.¹⁹ The ultimate act of protection in a "world of conflict" is to become a

protective presence for others, creating a realm of peace and happiness from within.

VI. Conclusion: Embodying the Spirit of the Bodhisattva

This exhaustive analysis of the Lotus Sutra's twenty-eighth chapter reveals that the Buddha's pronouncement is far more than a simple promise. The ability to "see me, and hear this sūtra from my mouth" is not a literal, temporal encounter with a historical figure. Instead, it is an internal realization of the eternal, immanent Buddha, whose life and teachings are ever-present and whose enlightened nature is inherent in all beings. This profound philosophical insight, rooted in the doctrines of the Immeasurable Lifespan and Universal Buddha-nature, provides the necessary context for understanding the practitioner's path.

The protective power of Universal-Sage Bodhisattva is not an external, unilateral gift but is a co-creative, reciprocal force that is activated by the practitioner's own diligent effort in upholding the Four Conditions and embodying the Bodhisattva's Ten Great Vows. The six-tusked elephant, therefore, is not merely a symbolic mount but a vivid representation of the very virtues—the six perfections—that the practitioner must cultivate. The protective deities and the Buddha are not distant entities; through the practice of the Lotus Sutra, the practitioner transforms their life, becoming a manifestation of the very compassion, wisdom, and protection they seek.

The Lotus Sutra offers a complete and cohesive path that unifies philosophy and practice. The doctrine of the One Vehicle asserts the interconnectedness of all beings on a singular path to Buddhahood, while the ethical framework of the bodhisattva's vows compels the practitioner to turn their individual practice into a force for universal good. As the user's reflection intuitively recognized, the final stage of this process is the embodiment of the protective spirit in a world of conflict. The ultimate act of protection is to become the protective presence for others, forging a realm of peace and security in the Saha world through the relentless pursuit of compassion, courage, and wisdom. This is the enduring and transformative message of the Lotus Sutra and the final, magnificent vision it presents for all humanity.

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