

The Non-Dual Praxis of the Lotus Sūtra (Chapter 28): The Synthesis of Wisdom, Compassion, and Lived Reality

I. Doctrinal and Textual Foundation: The Coda of Universal-Sage

1.0. The Soteriological Necessity of Chapter 28

The *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*) is arguably the most famous and influential of all Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, profoundly shaping East Asian doctrinal schools, including Tiantai, Tendai, and Nichiren Buddhism.¹ Chapter 28, "The Encouragement of Universal-Sage Bodhisattva," functions as the critical coda, transitioning the text from a period of profound cosmological and doctrinal revelation to a framework for practical survival and propagation in the human realm.¹ This chapter provides the ultimate guidance for practitioners existing in the challenging period after Shakyamuni Buddha's passing, commonly referred to as the "defiled world in the later five hundred years".²

The Sūtra itself frames its own transmission as an undertaking of extraordinary difficulty. It explicitly describes the teaching as "the most difficult to believe and the most difficult to understand".³ Consequently, the injunctions delivered in Chapter 28 are not mere suggestions for spiritual discipline, but crucial mandates necessary for grounding this radical and esoteric doctrine—which includes the concept of the eternal Buddha and the universal path to Buddhahood—in mundane, historical reality. The core passage commands the wise practitioner to

copy this sūtra with all his heart, cause others to copy it, and also keep, read and recite it, memorize it correctly, and act according to it [Query Context]. This instruction synthesizes devotional piety, intellectual engagement, and compassionate action into a singular, unified

methodology.

1.0.1. The Audience and the Goal: Universalizing the Bodhisattva Ideal

A critical element emphasized early in the *Lotus Sūtra* is that the Buddha teaches *only* Bodhisattvas, beings dedicated entirely to the benefit and liberation of all sentient life [Query Context]. This premise, when viewed through the lens of the Sūtra's central doctrine of *Ekayāna* (One Vehicle), transforms the nature of Buddhist practice itself.⁴ The

Ekayāna teaching asserts that all apparent spiritual paths—such as the paths of the Śrāvaka (hearer) or the *Pratyekabuddha* (solitary enlightened one)—are temporary "skillful means" (*upāya*) intended to lead practitioners ultimately to the Bodhisattva path and, subsequently, to supreme enlightenment.¹

The assertion that all beings have the potential to become Buddhas⁶ elevates the Bodhisattva path from an exceptional commitment reserved for a select few to the normative, essential expression of Buddhist spiritual life.⁴ Thus, the practices detailed in Chapter 28 are not esoteric practices for an elite audience, but the necessary, comprehensive engagement required for any individual striving to realize their innate potential for Buddhahood. The goal of practice is fundamentally altruistic: to attain enlightenment not for oneself alone, but for the universal family of beings.

1.0.2. The Bodhisattva Path as the Non-Negotiable Vehicle

The centrality of altruism is affirmed by the prerequisite conditions the Buddha lists for practitioners to successfully "obtain this Sūtra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma" after his extinction. The Buddha states that the good men or women who wish to obtain the Sūtra must perform four actions²:

1. Secure the protection of the Buddhas.
2. Plant the roots of virtue.
3. Reach the stage of steadiness in proceeding to enlightenment.
4. Resolve to save all living beings.

The placement of the "resolve to save all living beings" as an *initial prerequisite*, rather than merely a later consequence of practice, is highly significant.² This structure confirms that the genuine reception of the

Lotus Sūtra—which includes receiving its profound power and protection—is conditional upon the practitioner possessing the inherent altruistic motivation of a Bodhisattva. The ability to grasp the Sūtra's truth is inherently linked to the commitment to propagate that truth universally. This configuration establishes the altruistic intent as the necessary root condition, confirming the profound unity of self-benefit and other-benefit at the very outset of the path.

1.1. The Intercession of Universal-Sage Bodhisattva (Samantabhadra)

Universal-Sage Bodhisattva, known in Sanskrit as Samantabhadra, plays the crucial role of protector and guarantor of the Sūtra's enduring power. Samantabhadra arrives from a world to the east of the Sahā-World, accompanied by an innumerable assembly of great Bodhisattvas, displaying formidable virtues and unrestricted supernatural powers.² His presence at the Sūtra's conclusion underscores the shift from Shakyamuni's physical presence to the perpetual activity of the Dharma protectors in the age following the Buddha's physical passing.

1.1.1. The Vow of Protection

Upon arriving at Mount Grdhrikūṭa, Samantabhadra requests guidance on how good men and women living in the turbulent later age can obtain the Sūtra.² Following the Buddha's enumeration of the four prerequisites, Samantabhadra makes a potent vow: he promises explicit protection for those who keep the Sūtra in the defiled world, guaranteeing the integrity and successful transmission of the wisdom.²

The nature of this protection is active and specific. Samantabhadra declares that if a practitioner "should forget a single phrase or verse of the Lotus Sutra, I will prompt him and join him in reading and reciting so that he will gain understanding".⁸ This profound intervention reveals that the Sūtra's power is not solely reliant on the flawed, limited efforts of human beings but is eternally sustained and protected by cosmic forces. This guarantee legitimizes the practice in an age where the truth is obscured, bolstering the faith of ordinary beings in the Latter Age of the Law.⁹

1.1.2. Practice as the Condition for Seeing the Sacred

The textual tradition affirms an immediate, transformative connection between diligent practice and the manifestation of enlightened beings. Scholarly interpretations, citing Miaolo Zhanran's commentary on Chapter 28, confirm that those who receive and keep, read, copy, and expound the *Lotus Sūtra* will "behold Samantabhadra, as well as Prabhūtaratna Buddha, and the Buddhas of the ten different directions".⁹ Furthermore, the Sūtra promises that the person who successfully practices will "see my body, will be filled with great joy, and will apply himself with greater diligence than ever".⁸

This connection between practical engagement and the immediate vision of the sacred is a critical soteriological claim. It means that the Sūtra is not merely a historical relic or a philosophical text; it is an active agent of transformation. The practitioner's commitment transforms the mundane world into the sacred reality, aligning their consciousness instantaneously with the enduring presence of the eternal Buddha and his accompanying Bodhisattvas.¹ The practice itself is presented as a mechanism for immediate ontological validation, ensuring that the path is not merely intellectual but experiential.

II. The Sixfold Praxis: Methodology of Engagement and Merit Accumulation

2.0. The Integrated Path of Devotional and Active Commitment

The complete set of devotional acts concerning the *Lotus Sūtra*—often summarized as the Five or Six Practices—constitutes a comprehensive methodology for spiritual advancement. These practices, which span physical, intellectual, and existential commitment, move the practitioner from initial faith to full embodiment of the Dharma. The six injunctions mentioned in the query (copy, cause others to copy, keep, read, recite, memorize, and act according to it) incorporate the core acts detailed across the latter chapters of the Sūtra, particularly Chapter 10 ("Teacher of the Dharma") and Chapter 28.⁹

2.0.1. The Essence of Devoted Reception (*Dharana*)

The practice of "receiving and keeping" (*dharayisyanti* or upholding) is the foundational act, establishing the essential attitude of devoted reception.⁹ It signifies accepting the Sūtra's teaching as absolute truth and holding it faithfully as the guiding principle for one's entire life.⁹

Chinese Master Miaolo Zhanran (Zhanran, 711–782) noted the profound significance of this initial reception. He explained that "to keep the letters of the Lotus Sutra in mind" distinguishes this text from all others. By accepting and keeping the Sūtra, the practitioner gains expansive and immediate merit: "even to read only one letter is by that very act also to include eighty thousand treasure chambers of letters, and to receive the merits of all the Buddhas".⁹ This claim elevates the physical text from mere scripture to a direct repository of cosmic merit, emphasizing that the underlying attitude of devoted reception opens the gate to supreme enlightenment.⁹

2.1. The Cultivation of the Sūtra's Body (Copying and Reading)

2.1.1. Copying (*Likhisyanti* / *Shakyō*)

The practice of copying (*likhisyanti*), known as *shakyō* in Japan, is a crucial component of transmission and personal cultivation.¹⁰ Historically, this practice began as a necessary way to transmit the Dharma accurately and preserve the texts for future generations.¹¹ During the Nara period (710–794) in Japan, sutra copying became a state-sponsored enterprise, highlighting its societal importance.¹⁰

Beyond preservation, copying serves as a powerful devotional act and a form of somatic meditation. By meticulously concentrating on the careful tracing of each character, practitioners cultivate mindfulness, calm the mind, and purify their mental state.¹⁰ This physical labor is interpreted in specific East Asian schools as having deep theological significance. In Nichiren Buddhism, for example, the concept of "One Character, One Buddha" suggests that each written character embodies the Buddha himself. Therefore, the act of transcription becomes an intimate and direct form of communion with the Buddha's wisdom, leading to the accumulation of "immeasurable merit".¹² Copying thus functions as a catalyst for self-transformation, connecting the practitioner's diligent effort to the highest form of

spiritual attainment.

2.1.2. Reading, Reciting, and Memorizing

The acts of reading (*vacayisyanti*), reciting, and correctly remembering (*anumarisyanti*) constitute the interior, intellectual, and acoustic engagement with the text.⁹ These practices are designed to integrate the Sūtra's teachings into the practitioner's immediate consciousness.

Miaolo Zhanran's view on "single-minded" reading explains that the required focus is the intentional gathering of a mind that is otherwise dispersed in daily life.⁹ Furthermore, the Sūtra emphasizes that the benefits of reading and reciting are immediate: the place where the teaching is discussed or read should be constructed as a Tathagata shrine, "because the body of the Tathagata is all together there already in that place".⁹ The practitioner, through this engagement, is not simply reading about the Buddha, but realizing the Buddha's living presence.

The reward for correctly remembering the Sūtra is the immediate acquisition of spiritual power. The text promises that the dedicated practitioner will "immediately acquire samadhis and dharanis".⁸

Samadhis are specialized meditative concentrations, signifying profound internal stability, and *dharanis* are mystic formulas or internal mnemonic devices that guarantee the retention and integrity of the Dharma.⁸ These spiritual attainments confirm that the practices are mechanisms for instantaneous spiritual progress, moving the practitioner toward a state of inner realization.

2.2. The Zenith of Practice: "Acting According to It" (*Shikidoku*)

The final and most crucial injunction—to "act according to it"—moves the practitioner beyond inward devotion and physical transcription to active manifestation of the Dharma in the world. This is the domain of expounding and propagation (*prakasayisyanti* and *desana*).⁹ If the preceding five practices prepare the mind and body, this final act validates the Sūtra's power through engagement with the suffering of the world.

2.2.1. Nichiren's Doctrine of Bodily Reading

In Japanese Buddhist traditions, particularly the lineage founded by Nichiren (1222–1282), "acting according to it" was profoundly interpreted as *shikidoku*, or "bodily reading".⁹

Shikidoku involves confirming the Sūtra's truth not through intellectual study alone, but through the entirety of one's lived experience, especially by enduring persecution and tribulations for the sake of propagating the correct teaching.⁹

Nichiren's life demonstrated this principle, as he viewed the social and political consequences of his practice as confirmations of the Sūtra's veracity.⁹ This interpretive move elevates the practicing person into a living embodiment of the text, providing experiential evidence of the Sūtra's authority, a necessary measure given the Sūtra's own claims regarding the difficulty of belief.³

This embodiment links the concept of *ri no ichinen sanzen* (conceptual cosmic plenitude, attributed to Master Tiantai) with *ji no ichinen sanzen* (concretized cosmic plenitude), teaching that the full realization of the cosmic truth is achieved only through its application in the specific historical and social realm.⁹ The act of propagation, even under threat, transforms the practitioner's reality, proving the Sūtra's efficacy and fulfilling the core Bodhisattva resolve to awaken others.¹³

2.3. Comparative Analysis of the Lotus Sūtra's Sixfold Practice and Doctrinal Function

The practices mandated in Chapter 28 form a deliberate sequence leading from internal commitment to external manifestation. The integration of these various forms of engagement ensures a holistic, embodied path to enlightenment. The following table summarizes the function and significance of this integrated praxis.

The Sixfold Praxis of the Lotus Sūtra

Practice (Traditional Function)	Core Action	Doctrinal Function (Goal)	Key Interpretation (Tiantai/Nichiren)

Likhisyanti (Copy)	Physical transcription (Somatic Practice)	Preservation and accumulation of immeasurable merit; cultivation of mindfulness.	<i>Shakyō</i> : Each character embodies the Buddha ("One Character, One Buddha"); purifies the mind. ¹⁰
Dharayisyanti (Keep/Uphold)	Mental reception and acceptance of the text's authority.	Establishes the prerequisite attitude of devoted faith; secures access to the Sūtra's vast wisdom.	Holding the Sūtra in mind grants access to "eighty thousand treasure chambers of letters". ⁹
Vacayisyanti (Read/Recite)	Vocal/Intellectual repetition and engagement.	Cultivation of spiritual concentration (<i>samadhi</i>) and affirmation of the Dharma's reality.	Transforms the reading location into a Tathagata shrine, signaling the Buddha's presence. ⁹
Anumarisyanti (Memorize/Remember)	Internalization of meaning and structure.	Secures supernatural guidance (Samantabhadra's aid) and esoteric knowledge (<i>dharanis</i>).	Leads to the immediate acquisition of <i>samadhis</i> and <i>dharanis</i> . ⁸
Prakasisyanti/Desana (Exound/Propagate)	Active teaching and sharing of the Dharma with others.	Fulfillment of the core Bodhisattva vow; creation of a shared universal enlightenment cause.	The mission of awakening others, essential for transmitting the Sūtra into the future. ⁶
Act According To It (Practice)	Embodied conduct in the human world.	Total confirmation of the Dharma's truth through	<i>Shikidoku</i> (Bodily Reading): Concretized

		consequential action and perseverance.	realization (<i>ji no ichinen sanzen</i>) through responding to real-world events and tribulations. ⁹
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III. The Causality of Non-Duality: Self-Enlightenment Through Altruism

The core principle articulated in the query—that actions taken to lead others to enlightenment create the cause for one's own enlightenment—is the logical and soteriological consequence of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s Mahāyāna philosophy. This principle hinges upon the doctrine of non-duality (*advaya*) that underpins the entire Mahāyāna tradition.

3.0. The Mahāyāna Axiom: No Happiness While Others Suffer

The Mahāyāna movement developed, in part, as a philosophical and polemical reaction to the traditional pursuit of individual *nirvāṇa*, typically associated with the goal of the Arhat.¹⁴ Mahāyānists often criticized the Arhat ideal as being "selfish" because it sought liberation from

samsāra (the cycle of rebirth) for oneself alone, prioritizing individual extinction over universal relief from suffering.¹⁴

The Bodhisattva, by contrast, centralizes the virtue of compassion (*karuṇā*), vowing to postpone entry into final *nirvāṇa* even after achieving enlightenment, choosing instead to remain in the world to help those in distress.¹³ This perspective establishes that true happiness for the individual is philosophically and ethically impossible while others remain trapped in suffering.⁶ Therefore, the path of the Bodhisattva, defined by "taking compassionate action for others," becomes the only viable path to ultimate, complete enlightenment.⁶

3.1. The Doctrine of Causal Interdependence (*Pariṇāmanā*)

In early Buddhist philosophy, the law of karma traditionally held an individualistic view: an action produced a karmic effect only for the doer of the act.¹⁵ The Mahāyāna system, seeking to validate the altruistic endeavors of the Bodhisattva, developed the mechanism of

Pariṇāmanā (merit transfer or dedication of merit).¹⁵

Pariṇāmanā is the process by which a Bodhisattva intentionally directs the merit accumulated from their good deeds to ripen for the benefit of others, including deceased family members or all sentient beings.¹⁵ This dedication is a central feature of the Bodhisattva Vow, requiring a total self-abandonment that culminates in the "complete transfer of one's merit to other living beings".¹⁷

3.1.1. Resolving the Karmic Conflict

The perceived conflict between the individuality of karma and the transferability of merit has been the subject of scholarly analysis.¹⁵ However, within the Mahāyāna framework, particularly the context of the

Lotus Sūtra, the conflict is resolved by recognizing that the compassionate act fundamentally transforms the motivational basis of the karma itself. An action motivated by the pure, non-dual desire to liberate others is the highest expression of wisdom. The dedication of merit is not merely a quantitative subtraction from the donor's account; it is a qualitative transformation of their spiritual state.

In this context, the effort to change the karma of others—for instance, through preaching the Dharma—is indispensable for the Bodhisattva's own spiritual progress.¹⁶ By shifting the focus from personal gain to universal liberation, the practitioner moves beyond the constraints of individualized, self-serving causality. The act of dedicated effort is what ultimately fulfills the Bodhisattva's comprehensive vow, which secures their own supreme enlightenment precisely because the vow encompasses the salvation of all.

3.2. The Non-Duality of the Self and the World (*Ekayāna* Causality)

The deepest philosophical justification for the inseparable nature of self- and other-enlightenment resides in the Mahāyāna understanding of non-duality. The *Ekayāna* teaching affirms that all diverse strands of Buddhist thought and practice converge because ultimate reality itself is unified.⁵

3.2.1. Philosophical Grounding and Interconnection

If the *Lotus Sūtra* confirms the "Reality of All Existence" as one cosmic truth⁷, then the perceived separation between the self (A) and the other (B) is illusory. This ontological identity means that suffering is fundamentally interconnected, and any attempt to secure individual happiness while ignoring the suffering of the collective is based on delusion.⁶

This principle dictates the causal mandate: the effort to enlighten the "other" must necessarily function as the most complete and efficient form of self-cultivation. The profound connection between individual spiritual states and public realities is explicit in the traditions stemming from the *Sūtra*; for example, Nichiren's teaching asserts that because the self and the outer world are non-dual, "the fact of individuals privately embracing or rejecting the Lotus Sutra had public consequences".¹⁸

3.2.2. The Causal Loop as Identity

The doctrine states that "actions to benefit others cannot be separated from actions to benefit oneself".⁶ This is more than a simple moral reciprocity; it is a causal identity. By using the *Sūtra* to lead others to the

Ekayāna path, the practitioner is fundamentally acting in accordance with the ultimate truth of interconnectedness. This outward action serves as the *proof* and the *expression* of the inner realization of non-duality.

The practice of propagation (expounding or acting according to the *Sūtra*) therefore moves from being an optional virtuous act to being a cosmic necessity and the primary means of realization. The individual's self-enlightenment is perfected when their life becomes a demonstration of the transformation that is available to all beings.⁶ By embracing the sixfold praxis and committing to propagate the teaching, the practitioner fully embodies the Bodhisattva way, thereby realizing their own inherent Buddhahood.

IV. Conclusion: The Realization of Buddhahood in Engaged Action

The directives issued by the Buddha to Universal-Sage Bodhisattva in Chapter 28 of the *Lotus Sūtra* represent the culmination of Mahāyāna doctrine, integrating philosophical wisdom with concrete, compassionate praxis. The instructions—to copy, keep, read, recite, memorize, and act according to the Sūtra—are designed to create a continuous, holistic spiritual engagement that transcends mere intellectual study.

4.1. The Integration of Wisdom and Compassion

The six practices synthesize the dual requirements of wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). Wisdom is cultivated through the internal practices of reading and memorizing, leading to the insight of the *Ekayāna* truth and the non-duality of reality.⁵ Compassion is expressed through the outward action of propagation, the ultimate expression of the Bodhisattva vow to save all living beings.¹³ Without this final, altruistic commitment—the practice of "acting according to it"—the preceding practices remain incomplete in the Mahāyāna framework. The highest form of spiritual attainment is achieved when the individual's profound wisdom is perfectly manifested through relentless action on behalf of others.

4.2. Immediate Soteriological Confirmation

The benefits promised for engaging in this sixfold practice are immediate and experiential. The assurance that the practitioner will "see Sakyamuni Buddha" and behold Samantabhadra⁸ provides profound confirmation that the physical act of engaging with the text removes the illusion of separation from the enlightened state. This transformative realization confirms that the path of the

Lotus Sūtra leads to the attainment of Buddhahood "just as they are, in this lifetime".⁶ The commitment of the practitioner causes their current existence and environment to merge

instantaneously with the sacred reality of the eternal Dharma.

The wisdom required to embrace the mandates of Chapter 28 is the realization of non-duality. This realization compels compassionate action, affirming that the effort to lead others to enlightenment is not a detour from self-perfection but the most direct and necessary cause for the realization of one's own Buddhahood. By embodying the sixfold praxis, the practitioner ceases to be a passive recipient of the Buddha's teaching and becomes an active agent and demonstrator of the eternal Dharma's transformative power, ensuring its perpetuity for generations to come.⁶

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