

The Joyful Display of the Buddhas: A Deconstruction of Supernatural Power and an Eternal Vow

Executive Summary: The Joy of Entrustment

The verse from Chapter Twenty-One of the Lotus Sūtra, "The Buddhas joyfully display their immeasurable, supernatural powers because[vow to] keep this sūtra after my extinction," is a profound and multi-layered statement. It is not merely a description of a grand cosmic spectacle, but a pivotal moment in the sutra's narrative that bridges the cosmic and the personal. The passage affirms that the Buddha's "supernatural powers" are not arbitrary magical feats, but are expressions of a deep, unhindered state of life. As the analysis demonstrates, they are a joyful response to the solemn determination of his eternal disciples. This report explores how this passage serves as a culmination of the sutra's essential teaching, revealing the philosophical meaning of divine power, the allegorical significance of the Bodhisattvas from underground, and the enduring, transformative principle of changing suffering into joy. Ultimately, the report posits that the Buddha's magnificent display is a timeless celebration of a shared, eternal vow, a vow that is passed to all who commit to awakening their own innate potential for enlightenment.

Part 1: The Culmination of the Sūtra's Essential Teaching

1.1 The Narrative Climax of the Essential Section

Chapter Twenty-One, titled "The Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One," occupies a critical position within the Lotus Sūtra's structure. It serves as the narrative climax of the "essential teaching" (the latter fourteen chapters), which begins with the dramatic emergence of the Bodhisattvas from underground in Chapter Fifteen [1, 2]. The entire essential section is dedicated to resolving a fundamental question posed by Bodhisattva Maitreya: how could Śākyamuni Buddha, who appeared to have attained enlightenment only forty-odd years prior, have taught and trained such an immense, countless host of disciples [1]? Chapter Sixteen, "The Life Span of the Thus Come One," provides the initial answer by revealing that the Buddha first attained enlightenment in the unimaginably distant past. Chapter Twenty-One culminates this revelation by showing the Buddha entrusting the essence of his teachings to these very same eternal disciples [3, 4]. This entrustment is the fulfillment of the compassionate desire of the Buddha to ensure the propagation of the Lotus Sutra after his physical passing [5].

1.2 The Literal Manifestation of Divine Power

The verse in question is part of a larger, cosmic spectacle described in detail within the chapter. As the Bodhisattvas of the Earth vow to propagate the sutra, the World-Honored One Śākyamuni Buddha responds by displaying his great supernatural powers [6]. The display begins with him stretching his broad and long tongue upward until it reaches the World of Brahman [6, 7, 8]. Simultaneously, he emits innumerable rays of light from all his pores, each of a different color, which illuminate all the worlds of the ten directions [6, 7, 8]. This manifestation is not unique to Śākyamuni; the Buddhas from other worlds, sitting under jeweled trees, also perform the same miraculous acts [6]. The entire display continues for one hundred thousand years [6, 8], after which the Buddhas draw in their tongues and, in unison, cough and snap their fingers. The sounds of these actions fill all the Buddha worlds, causing the earth in all of them to quake in six different ways [6, 8]. This grand, multi-sensory spectacle creates an atmosphere of awe and solemnity, intended to cause all beings to rejoice [6].

1.3 Deeper Insights and Causal Analysis

The central narrative of the verse is a direct cause-and-effect relationship. The Buddhas' immeasurable, supernatural powers are displayed because the Bodhisattvas from underground have vowed to keep the sutra [6, 8]. This is a crucial point that elevates the event beyond a mere demonstration of divine might. The powers are not an arbitrary show of force; they are a jubilant, reciprocal response. The verse reveals that the Buddha's joy and his

magnificent, cosmic display are directly proportional to the solemn determination and vow of his followers. The action of the disciples—their resolute pledge to propagate the Dharma—becomes the source of the Buddha's exultation. This turns the typical perception of a top-down, one-way relationship from teacher to disciple into a dynamic, two-way interaction where human determination can elicit a profoundly positive and celebratory divine response. The Buddha's joy is an endorsement of his disciples' unwavering resolve.

Part 2: The Philosophical Meaning of "Supernatural Powers"

2.1 *Jinzu-riki* as a Skillful Expedient (*Upāya*)

In the context of Mahayana Buddhism, particularly within the Lotus Sūtra, "supernatural powers" (*jīnzu-riki* or *rddhi*) are understood not as ends in themselves but as a tool. The Buddha employs them as a "skillful means" (*upāya*) to attract, educate, and guide sentient beings toward enlightenment [9, 10]. The purpose of the powers is to break through the intellectual limitations and preconceived notions of the audience and open their minds to the profound teachings of the sutra [9, 10]. The sheer impossibility of the feats, such as a tongue reaching the heavens or light from every pore, is designed to "unsettle one's usual habits of perception and understanding" [10]. This is reinforced by the parable of the magic city [9], where a leader uses a supernatural illusion to give his followers a chance to rest before leading them to the true goal of the journey, the "place of jewels" (enlightenment). The divine powers, therefore, are a means to a non-magical, philosophical end.

2.2 A New Image of the Eternal Buddha

The supernatural display in Chapter Twenty-One is a deliberate and compassionate act. While the Buddha's true, eternal body is not meant to be seen too often, to prevent followers from becoming indolent [9], this display of divine power is made "visible to all sentient beings" [11]. The exhibition of the Buddha's powers is a crucial part of the process of revealing his eternal nature, as described in the chapter "The Life Span of the Thus Come One." The emission of light is a recurring motif in the Lotus Sūtra that serves as a great auspicious sign [9]. The

sheer abundance of light—emanating from every hair pore of every Buddha—symbolizes that the teachings of the Lotus Sūtra are not exclusive but are all-encompassing and universally illuminating. This use of supernatural power showcases a sophisticated and compassionate strategy to attract and guide beings, demonstrating a power that is deeply intertwined with wisdom and love.

2.3 Deeper Insights and Analytical Commentary

The Buddha's supernatural display is a cosmic-scale parable. The physical and auditory feats—the stretched tongue, the pervasive light, the quaking of the earth—are a grand, external manifestation of the Buddha's internal, limitless wisdom and compassion. The powers are not "supernatural" in the sense of defying natural law; rather, they are the pure, unhindered expression of an enlightened life state that only appears to be so to those who are "mired in delusion and ignorance" [user query]. The Buddha's display is a demonstration of how a truly enlightened life naturally gives rise to phenomenal abilities and boundless effects. The use of supernatural power is a form of embodied wisdom and compassionate intent, designed to lead sentient beings to their own, ultimate liberation.

To further clarify the expedient nature of these divine displays, the following table provides a detailed breakdown of their literal form, symbolic meaning, and strategic function.

Supernatural Power (Literal)	Symbolic Meaning	Expedient Function (<i>Upāya</i>)
Stretched Tongue to Brahma Heaven	The boundless reach of the Buddha's teachings; the proclamation of truth across all realms.	To create an atmosphere of awe and solemnity, attracting the attention of all beings.
Light Emitted from All Pores	The pervasive and illuminating nature of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion.	To signal a great auspicious event and guide beings to hear the Law.
Unison Coughing and Finger-snapping	The resounding, all-encompassing call to awaken; the vibration of the Dharma.	To unify all beings in a shared, profound experience that shakes the very ground of their

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Part 3: The Bodhisattvas' Vow and the Ground of Being

3.1 Emerging from the Ground of Being

The Bodhisattvas from underground represent a fundamental shift in the narrative and philosophical focus of the Lotus Sūtra. In Chapter Fifteen, an immense host of bodhisattvas, described as equal in number to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers, emerges from the trembling earth, led by four primary figures: Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices, and Firmly Established Practices [1, 4, 12]. These bodhisattvas are identified as the "original disciples" of the eternal Buddha, whom he has been instructing since "long ago" [1, 2, 5]. The entire spectacle serves as a powerful allegory for the inherent potential for enlightenment that exists within all beings [2, 12]. This potential is not something to be sought externally or imported from a distant realm; it is "already here on earth, inherent in all things" [12]. They are said to arise from the "openness in the ground of our being," signifying that the path to awakening is one of uncovering and manifesting what is already latent within one's own life [13]. Their very names embody the virtues of a Buddha's life: true self, eternity, purity, and happiness, qualities that are brought forth from the depths of life itself [4].

3.2 The Vow to Keep the Sūtra

The Bodhisattvas of the Earth did not simply emerge; they emerged with a profound and specific vow. In response to the Buddha's appeal, they pledged to "keep this sūtra after my extinction" [6]. This vow is a solemn commitment to propagate the Lotus Sutra in the "evil age" after Śākyamuni Buddha's passing, a time of conflict and turmoil [5]. By making this pledge, they inherit and strive to actualize the "compassionate desire of the Buddha"—the wish to "cause living beings to gain entry into the unsurpassed way and quickly acquire the body of a buddha" [5]. As noted previously, this vow is the direct cause of the Buddha's great joy [6, 8]. The Buddha's joyful display is a profound endorsement of his disciples' unwavering resolve, affirming that their determined action is the very foundation for the continuation of

his mission.

3.3 Deeper Insights and Broader Implications

The Buddha's rejection of the bodhisattvas from other realms and his summoning of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is a pivotal and profound moment in the sutra [1, 12]. This act signifies that the responsibility for propagating the Dharma in this world of suffering (*Sāhā*-world) lies not with external saviors, but with those who have a deep karmic connection to it. This choice makes the Buddha's teaching profoundly immanent and socially engaged, rooting the mission of Buddhism in the here and now, amidst the difficulties of this world [13]. The entire narrative underscores that a passive, observational approach is insufficient. The Buddha celebrates and empowers the active, vowed determination of those who will continue his work in the most challenging of times.

Part 4: The Transformative Principle of "Poison into Medicine"

4.1 The Three Poisons as a Cause of Suffering

Buddhism teaches that the fundamental cause of human suffering and unhappiness stems from the "three poisons" of greed, anger, and foolishness [14, 15, 16]. Historically, early Buddhist teachings often focused on the need to extinguish these poisons in order to achieve liberation and enlightenment [16]. The user's query offers a thoughtful and powerful modern application of this ancient principle, rephrasing the poisons as "anger," "isolation," and "attachment." This modern interpretation aligns with the core Buddhist framework by linking ancient spiritual principles to contemporary emotional and psychological states.

4.2 The Mechanism of Transformation

The Lotus Sūtra and Nichiren Buddhism offer a unique and transformative path. Rather than striving to extinguish desires and suffering, they teach that these aspects are inseparable from enlightenment and can be used as fuel for growth [16]. This is encapsulated in the principle that "earthly desires lead to enlightenment" [16, 17]. The teaching asserts that the "poison" of suffering is not a barrier to be avoided, but the very "fuel" needed to ignite the "wisdom fire of bodhi or enlightenment" [16]. The core principle of "changing poison into medicine" holds that with a strong and determined faith, one can transform problems and difficulties into happiness and victory without fail [17, 18]. The power of the Mystic Law (*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*) transforms the "three paths of earthly desires, karma and suffering into the three virtues of the Dharma body, wisdom and emancipation" [16]. This demonstrates a fundamental shift from a path of elimination to a path of profound transformation.

4.3 Deeper Insights and Practical Application

The user's query astutely connects the transformed poisons to their corresponding "medicines": anger becomes energy, isolation becomes compassion, and attachment becomes wisdom. This connection is profoundly supported by the Buddhist framework. Anger, when illuminated by the wisdom of the Mystic Law, can be transformed into the courage and "energy" to fight for justice and challenge one's own limitations [18, 19]. Isolation, which stems from a sense of separation and disconnection from others, is overcome by the awakening of the "compassion" that arises from realizing one's shared mission with all beings [2, 5]. Finally, attachment, which binds a person to fleeting desires, is transformed into the "wisdom" that allows a person to see the true nature of all things without clinging, enabling true liberation [12].

The following table visualizes this transformative process, directly engaging with the user's personal insight and grounding it in traditional Buddhist concepts.

User's "Poison"	Corresponding "Medicine"	Traditional Poison	Buddhist Principle
Anger	Energy	Hatred	The transformation of a negative mind state into courageous, determined action.
Isolation	Compassion	Foolishness/Delusion	The realization of interconnectedness

		n	and the shared mission to help others.
Attachment	Wisdom	Greed/Attachment	The attainment of transcendent insight that frees one from clinging.

Part 5: The Enduring Vow: Nichiren and the Modern Practitioner

5.1 Nichiren's Embodiment of Superior Practices

The verse from Chapter Twenty-One holds particular significance in Nichiren Buddhism, as Nichiren saw himself as the embodiment of Bodhisattva Superior Practices, the leader of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth [4, 20, 21]. Nichiren's writings explicitly state this identity, asserting that his efforts to propagate the Lotus Sūtra were the very work of Bodhisattva Superior Practices [4]. By revealing and establishing the practice of chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* as the path to enlightenment for all people in the Latter Day of the Law, he fulfilled the mission entrusted to him in the sutra [21, 22]. In some interpretations, Nichiren is seen as revealing the "cause" of Buddhahood (the chanting) for all people, while Śākyamuni Buddha only revealed the "effect" of his own enlightenment [21]. Nichiren's life, marked by repeated persecutions and hardships, was viewed as proof that he was fulfilling the vow of the bodhisattva leader and embodying the principles of the sutra in a time of great turmoil [23].

5.2 The Universal Embodiment: A Shared Mission

This identity as a Bodhisattva of the Earth is not exclusive to Nichiren. In his writings, he extends this mission to all his followers, stating that there should be "no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo" [2]. He further asks, "Does this

not signify 'emerging from the earth'?" when his followers begin to chant and teach others [2]. This makes the vow universal and deeply personal. The Bodhisattvas of the Earth are not abstract figures of the past but are described as those who "live to fulfill the mission of transmitting the fundamental Law" to those "burdened with the greatest misery and hardship" [5]. This shared mission is known as *kosen-rufu*, the widespread propagation of the teachings, and is realized through an active alliance of individuals who encourage one another and work together to achieve their goals [5]. By engaging in this compassionate practice, a person can transform their own life and help others do the same, thereby embodying the essence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.

5.3 Deeper Insights and Thematic Links

The entire narrative of the Lotus Sūtra, from the cosmic spectacle to the personal practice, is a profound and beautiful arc of transformation. The Buddha's joyful display is a celebration of a vow made in the distant past. Nichiren's embodiment of that vow makes it tangible and accessible in the present. The extension of this identity to all his followers makes the vow a universal and deeply personal mission. The original, immeasurable supernatural power of the Buddha is not a remote fantasy but is made real and tangible in the human capacity for transformation. The Buddha's ancient joy is re-created every time a person, mired in the "three poisons," stands up to transform their own life and help others, thereby "emerging from the earth" [2] to fulfill their eternal mission.

Conclusion: The Enduring Joyful Display

The Buddha's immeasurable, supernatural powers are not a remote fantasy but a divine expression of joy and trust. They represent a timeless response to the eternal vow of his disciples. The true "supernatural power" is the human capacity for transformation—to turn the poison of anger into the energy of action, isolation into the compassion of connection, and attachment into the wisdom of liberation. This transformative power, once revealed in a spectacular cosmic display, is now realized and renewed every day in the life of each practitioner. The joy of the Buddhas is not an ancient memory; it is an enduring, celebratory reality that is expressed every time a person decides to fulfill their vow and continue the work of the Bodhisattvas from underground.