

The Bodhisattva in Our Midst: Exegesis and Implications of the Practitioner's Status in Lotus Sūtra Chapter 17

I. Introduction: The Radical Claim of Immediate Equivalence

Chapter 17 of the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* (The Lotus Sūtra), titled "Distinctions in Merits," presents one of the most profound and revolutionary doctrinal claims within Mahāyāna Buddhism: the assertion that any diligent practitioner who upholds the Sūtra after the Buddha's physical passing is functionally and theologically equivalent to the Buddha himself. This assertion forms the foundation for later East Asian schools, notably Tiantai and Nichiren Buddhism, which center their practice on the *Lotus Sūtra* as the ultimate, complete teaching.¹

I.A. Contextual Placement: Chapter 17 and the Doctrine of Eternal Lifespan

The placement of Chapter 17 is structurally and doctrinally crucial, immediately following Chapter 16, "The Lifespan of the Tathāgata." Chapter 16 reveals that the Buddha's life span is not a historical 80-year duration but is immeasurable, limitless, and eternal.¹ The purpose of Chapter 17 is to provide the practical means by which ordinary sentient beings can access and actualize this eternal life force, especially in the period following the historical Śākyamuni Buddha's apparent

Parinirvāṇa.

The shift emphasizes that the ultimate merit (*puṇya*) is not derived merely from devotional acts directed toward a distant, historical figure, but rather from embracing the eternal Dharma

itself as embodied in the Sūtra.³ The joy in hearing and believing the revelation of the Buddha's infinite lifespan is established as the causal factor for accumulating unsurpassed benefits and attaining Buddhahood.³ This theological transition establishes the

Lotus Sūtra as the single, supreme path (Ekayāna), moving the focus from external reliance on the Buddha's physical relics (*śarīra*) to the internal realization of the Buddha's true nature (*Dharma-kāya*), which resides within the committed practitioner.³

I.B. The Paradox of Post-Extinction Attainment

The core assertion that upholding the Sūtra "after my extinction" yields immediate, irreversible proximity to Buddhahood challenges gradualist models of enlightenment traditionally espoused in earlier scriptures. These earlier teachings often required sentient beings to cultivate merit and virtues through the practice of the six *Pāramitās* over countless *kalpas* (eons).⁴ Chapter 17, however, fundamentally redefines the accumulation of merit. Embracing the

Lotus Sūtra is described as the *supreme expression* of giving offerings to the Buddhas in the universe.³

The analytical comparison of these paths suggests that the practice of the *Lotus Sūtra* is the non-dual path where cause and effect are simultaneous, rather than temporal. The text affirms that a person who embraces the Sūtra has already "built pagodas and monasteries as well as given offerings to the immeasurable Buddhas for innumerable kalpas".³ This means the spiritual efficacy of the Sūtra subsumes all prior meritorious practices, granting immediate realization of the ultimate result. Practitioners, therefore, receive the foremost in blessings, merits, and virtues, lifetime after lifetime.³

II. The Textual Mandate: Ajita (Maitreya) and the Votary's Honor

The Buddha's teaching on the radical status of the Votary (the practitioner) is delivered specifically to Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Maitreya, whom he addresses as "Ajita" (Invincible or Unconquerable).⁵ This exchange places the mandate for veneration within the highest sphere

of celestial authority and future continuity.

II.A. Addressing the Future Buddha: Maitreya's Role as Ajita

Maitreya is universally recognized across Buddhist schools as the future Buddha of this world.⁵ His role in the

Lotus Sūtra is uniquely positioned: he is not merely a listener but is tasked as a steward and protector of the Dharma in the future, particularly for those whom the Buddha entrusts with propagating the Sūtra—the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.⁵ Maitreya's epithet, Ajita, signifies his invincibility.⁷

The teaching being directed to the "Invincible" protector carries profound significance for the practice in the degenerate age. The practitioners are those who operate in the "world of conflict" (*Mappō*), where they are highly vulnerable to fierce and relentless persecution.⁸ The Buddha's mandate to Ajita is thus a pre-emptive delegation, commanding divine and celestial protection over the vulnerable human practitioners. This guarantees the validity and safety of those who uphold the ultimate Law despite the inevitable earthly hostility they face [Query]. The Buddha, by instructing the highest future authority to venerate and protect the Votaries, guarantees the continuity and supremacy of his ultimate Law and its carriers.

II.B. Defining the Practice: Keeping, Reading, and Reciting

The core practice that earns this extraordinary merit is described simply as one who "keeps, reads, or recites this sūtra" [Query]. However, the canonical text and subsequent commentaries elaborate upon this, defining it as the comprehensive practice of the Votary. This full scope of practice includes the active engagement with the Dharma: reading, reciting, accepting, embracing, explaining it to others, writing it out, or asking others to copy it.³

Moreover, the genuine acceptance of the Sūtra is inseparable from the cultivation of the Bodhisattva Way. The practitioner must also practice the Six *Pāramitās* (perfections), including achieving purity through observing the precepts, associating with those who are gentle and kind, maintaining patience and refraining from anger, possessing firm aspiration, engaging in seated meditation, and advancing with ferocious courage and diligence.³ Thus, upholding the Sūtra is not a shortcut around ethical conduct, but rather the

culmination of ethical and virtuous behavior, manifesting the compassionate action necessary

to benefit all beings.¹¹

The superiority of this practice is clearly established by comparison with traditional merit accumulation, as summarized in the table below:

Table 1: Comparison of Merit Accumulation: Sūtra Upholding vs. Traditional Pāramitās

Practice/Activity	Mechanism of Attainment	Temporal Scale	Theological Implication (Chapter 17)
Traditional Five Pāramitās (Giving, Discipline, Vigor, Meditation, Wisdom)	Accumulation of "external merit and internal virtue" through structured deeds. ¹²	Cultivated over countless kalpas (eons). ⁴	Gradualist path; results in future Buddhahood after many rebirths. ¹³
Embracing/Upholding the Lotus Sūtra (Reading, Reciting, Copying)	Direct realization of the ultimate truth (Ekayāna) and the Buddha's eternal life. ¹⁴	Confirms status immediately ("already reached"). ³	Supreme offering; constitutes simultaneous merit accumulation, resulting in immediate (or guaranteed near-future) Anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi. ³

III. The Status of the Realized Practitioner: Immediate Confirmation

The most radical aspect of the mandate is the declaration of the practitioner's spiritual status. The Buddha uses language that transcends conventional temporal progression, affirming that the Votary has already completed the ultimate journey.

III.A. Approaching Supreme Perfect Enlightenment (*Anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*)

The object of the Mahāyāna path is *Anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*, defined as the ultimate enlightened state of Buddhahood, characterized by perfect awakening and a thorough realization of the true nature of reality.¹⁵ The Buddha proclaims that the Votary "will be able to obtain these merits" and should be considered to have "approached

Anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi" [Query]. This is an affirmation of irreversible spiritual progression. The practitioner has moved onto the non-retreating ground (*avaivartika*), guaranteeing their attainment of the supreme path.² Furthermore, the text states the practitioner will attain a state of "no outflows" (

anāsrava), signifying freedom from karmic defilements and attachments—a necessary purity required for broadly benefiting gods and humans.³

III.B. The Symbolic Confirmation: Sitting Under the Tree of Enlightenment (*Bodhimaṇḍa*)

The Buddha's declaration that the practitioner has "already reached the place of enlightenment, approached *Anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*, and sat under the tree of enlightenment" [Query] is a pivotal theological moment. The Bodhi Tree (*Bodhiruma*) symbolizes the site of final awakening, where Śākyamuni achieved supreme perfect enlightenment after six years of practice.¹⁷

Granting this status pre-emptively—using past tense terminology for a future event—establishes the core textual foundation for the East Asian doctrine of Attaining Buddhahood in One's Present Form (*sokushin jōbutsu*). This implies that the act of embracing the Sūtra does not *create* Buddhahood, but rather *reveals* the inherent Buddhahood already present within the practitioner.¹⁸ The practitioner does not need to wait for countless future rebirths to achieve the status of the

Bodhimaṇḍa; that sacred place is actualized in the *here and now* of their present existence.³

From a sophisticated doctrinal perspective, the historical Buddha's key biographical events—renouncing the world, awakening under the Bodhi Tree, and entering *Nirvāṇa*—are viewed by the *Lotus Sūtra* as "skillful means" (*upāya*) designed to awaken living beings.¹⁸ By granting the Votary the status of having already completed these acts, the Buddha implies

that the Votary, in their present life in the defiled world, becomes the living

upāya—the compassionate and provisional form needed to guide beings during the degenerate age. They are, in effect, ready to fulfill the vow to benefit all living beings.³

IV. The Stūpa Mandate: Transcending Relics and Time

The command to Maitreya regarding the appropriate veneration of the Votary is the most striking textual demonstration of this immediate equivalence.

IV.A. The Traditional Significance of the *Stūpa*

Historically, the *stūpa* (or pagoda) was the sacred repository for the physical relics (*śarīra*) of the Buddha after his *Parinirvāṇa*, symbolizing his ultimate transcendence.³ Offerings to a

stūpa represented the most fundamental post-extinction meritorious practice. The *stūpa* traditionally confirmed the absolute separation between the enlightened realm and the mortal, suffering world.

IV.B. The Command to Veneration: The Living Relic

The Buddha issues a revolutionary command: "Ajita! Erect a *stūpa* in the place where he or she sat, stood or walked! All gods and men should make offerings to that *stūpa* just as they do to the *stūpa* of a Buddha" [Query]. This instruction demands the highest possible form of veneration for a living individual and collapses the distinction between the sacred monument and the mundane environment.²

The practice site is immediately consecrated; wherever the practitioner resides, "the Buddha lives within them" and the place belongs to the Buddha himself.² Because the Buddhas dwell within these people, they deserve the offerings of heavenly and human beings, "as if they are the Buddhas themselves".³ This mandate fundamentally de-centralizes the sacred, asserting that

anywhere the Votary acts is instantly consecrated as a supreme holy site. This elevates ordinary daily life and action into a vehicle for Buddhahood.

IV.C. The Theological Implication: Non-Duality and Inherent Buddhahood

The mandate for the living *stūpa* is the ultimate expression of the Mahāyāna doctrine of **Inherent Buddhahood** (Buddha-nature).¹⁸ By demanding a

stūpa for the living person, the Buddha declares that the Votary's mortal form is a tangible manifestation of the eternal *Dharma-kāya*.³ They are not merely disciples or followers; they are embodying the Buddha's continuing presence in the world.

This concept aligns with Tiantai philosophy, which asserts the non-duality of the sentient being and their environment. Tiantai masters expanded this notion, suggesting that Buddha-nature is pervasive and intrinsic even in insentient objects, such that "every blade of grass, tree, pebble, and particle of dust is perfectly endowed with buddha nature".¹⁸ If all reality is the Absolute, then the ground upon which the Votary stands is inherently sacred and deserves veneration as the Buddha's land. The Votary's physical space—the site of walking, sitting, or reclining—is instantly realized as the

dharma-dhātu (realm of reality).²⁰

The concepts presented in Chapter 17 concerning the practitioner's ultimate status are summarized in the table below:

Table 2: Key Concepts of Enlightenment Status in Chapter 17

Sanskrit Term/Symbol	Literal Meaning	Status Conferred on the Practitioner (Chapter 17)	Doctrinal Significance
<i>Anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi</i>	Supreme Perfect Enlightenment	The irreversible goal that the practitioner has "approached". ¹⁵	Guarantee of ultimate Buddhahood; irreversible progression on the

			Bodhisattva path. ²
The Bodhimaṇḍa / Bodhi Tree	The place of final awakening	The practitioner is considered to have "already reached" and "sat under" it. ³	Confirms the realization of inherent Buddhahood (<i>sokushin jōbutsu</i>) in the present form. ¹⁸
<i>Stūpa</i> / Pagoda Mandate	Monument for Buddha relics/Dharma-body	Built for the <i>living</i> practitioner wherever they reside; venerated by gods and humans. ¹⁰	The practitioner's environment embodies the Buddha's eternal reality (<i>Dharma-kāya</i>), merging the sacred and the mundane. ³
Ajita (Maitreya)	Invincible, Unconquerable	Recipient of the mandate; steward/protector of the Votary in the age of conflict. ⁵	Links the Votary's practice to the cosmological mission of the future Buddha, ensuring protection and lineage continuity. ⁶

V. The Context of the Degenerate Age (*Mappō*) and the Votary's Vow

The Buddha's teaching on the Votary's status is not given in a time of peace, but specifically for "after my extinction," a period the user refers to as this "world of conflict" [Query]. Doctrinally, this era is known as the Latter Day of the Law (*Mappō*), a degenerate age where the true Dharma is obscured and difficult to practice.⁹

V.A. The "World of Conflict": Defining *Mappō*

In *Mappō*, traditional merit is diminished, and people are said to be too ignorant to find salvation through complex earlier teachings.²¹ The rarity of finding this teaching, and even more so, the rarity of practicing it, is highlighted in commentary, which compares those who practice the

Lotus Sūtra in this age to the amount of dirt "under a fingernail," relative to the total population.²² This extreme rarity underscores the immense merit accrued by those who embrace the *Sūtra* during this time.

The Votary's dedication in *Mappō* is rooted in the vow of the "Bodhisattvas of the Earth," who willingly appeared in this "world of conflict" to benefit all beings.⁶ The instruction to Maitreya and other protective deities to serve and care for these practitioners underscores the vital importance of their mission in this defiled age.⁵

V.B. The Inevitability and Necessity of Persecution

The *Lotus Sūtra* not only anticipates conflict but actively prophesies the hostility the Votary must endure. Chapter 17's context includes the severe warnings that hostility will abound "after his passing," driven by "hatred and jealousy".⁸ Persecutions are described as fierce and relentless, manifesting as slander, abuse, false accusations, banishment, and exile.⁸ These obstacles often come from within the Buddhist clergy itself—"arrogant priests" and "false sages" clinging to shallow interpretations.¹³

In the context of *Mappō*, the merit described in Chapter 17 is magnified precisely because it is practiced under duress. The obstacles faced by the Votary are not incidental setbacks, but definitive proof of upholding the supreme Law.⁸ This reverses conventional thinking: the greater the persecution, the stronger the Votary's conviction, and thus the closer the practitioner is to the

Bodhimaṇḍa. This establishes a powerful dialectic of obstacle and enlightenment, where the conflict itself becomes the crucible for immediate Buddhahood. The perseverance of the Votary is defined not as passive acceptance, but as an act of "solemn, rigorous compassion" motivated by a mission to prevent others from falling into the unfortunate trap of slandering the ultimate Law.⁸

VI. Theological and Sectarian Reception of Chapter 17

Chapter 17 provided crucial doctrinal support for major East Asian Buddhist traditions, specifically Tiantai and Nichiren schools, enabling them to construct sophisticated doctrines around inherent Buddhahood and immediate enlightenment.

VI.A. The Tiantai/Tendai Philosophical Interpretation

The Tiantai school of China and its derivative, Tendai in Japan, regard the *Lotus Sūtra* as the crowning teaching of the Buddha.¹ Tiantai doctrine utilized the implications of Chapter 17 to advance the concept of the

Inherent Buddhahood of All Existence.

Masters like Zhiyi and Zhanran posited that the ultimate principle is non-dual, meaning there are no objects separate from the mind.¹⁸ This philosophical stance, informed by the non-duality inherent in Chapter 17's commands, allowed Tiantai to assert that every aspect of the phenomenal world, even insentient things, is ultimately real and represents the Absolute (Buddha-nature).¹⁹ Furthermore, by observing the mind and thoughts, one can perceive the entirety of reality and achieve Buddhahood.¹⁹ The philosophical justification for the

stūpa mandate—venerating the ground where the Votary stands—is thus found in the Tiantai teaching: if the absoluteness of one entity (the Votary) is realized, then every other entity (the environment) is equally absolute.¹⁸

VI.B. The Nichiren Doctrinal Emphasis

Nichiren Buddhism in Japan bases its entire premise on the *Lotus Sūtra* as the sole vehicle for liberation in the Latter Day of the Law (*Mappō*).⁹ Nichiren Daishonin viewed the teachings in Chapter 17 and related passages as direct prophecies concerning himself and his followers, who would face persecution for upholding the Sūtra in the age of conflict.⁸

Nichiren specifically interprets the status of Ajita/Maitreya as a designation for the **Votaries of**

the **Lotus Sūtra** themselves, who compassionately uphold the teaching.⁵ For Nichiren practitioners, the single form of practice required in

Mappō is the recitation of the Sūtra's title, the *Daimoku: Namu Myōhō Renge-kyō*.⁹ The act of chanting this phrase is understood to allow beings to tap directly into the merits described in Chapter 17, immediately revealing their inherent Buddhahood and fulfilling the status of being "already seated under the Bodhi tree".²⁰

VI.C. Synthesis of Ekayāna and Humanism

The radical claims of Chapter 17 serve to reinforce the doctrine of the **One Vehicle (Ekayāna)**, which asserts that all paths and practices are ultimately skillful means leading to the single, overarching goal of Buddhahood.¹ By declaring that "any good man or woman" [Query] can attain this status, the Sūtra democratizes deification. Buddhahood is not an exclusive realm attainable only by historical figures or celestial beings after aeons of practice, but rather an immediate potential realized by the common devotee in this lifetime, just as they are.¹¹

The resolution of the historical/a-historical tension is clear: by stating the practitioner is *already* sitting under the Bodhi tree, the text removes the need to replicate the historical process of the Buddha's ascetic life.¹⁷ The shift centers enlightenment on the immediate, internal reality of the practitioner's mind, empowering the individual to realize their inherent status as a living Buddha, making them the ultimate manifestation of the Buddha's compassionate wisdom in the world of conflict.

VII. Conclusion

Chapter 17 of the *Lotus Sūtra* performs a critical function in Mahāyāna soteriology by providing the mechanism for practitioners to actualize the revelation of the Buddha's eternal lifespan disclosed in the preceding chapter. The mandate to Maitreya (Ajita) to venerate the Sūtra Votary as the Buddha himself is a direct textual warrant for the doctrine of immediate enlightenment.

The Votary's status is elevated by conferring upon them the three primary symbols of ultimate spiritual authority: irreversible progression toward *Anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*, the attainment of the *Bodhimaṇḍa*, and the command for the erection of a living *stūpa*. This last command is

the ultimate expression of non-duality, consecrating the mundane activities and environment of the practitioner, confirming that the spiritual goal is not a distant transcendence but a reality manifest in the present moment, accessible through the dedicated practice of embracing, reading, and reciting the Wonderful Dharma. In the perilous age of conflict (*Mappō*), the Votary's perseverance, often characterized by enduring fierce persecution, becomes the supreme measure of merit and the definitive proof of their equivalence to the Buddha. The practitioner thus serves as the living embodiment of the Dharma-Kāya, bringing the Buddha's greatest wisdom to life and ensuring the continuity of the ultimate truth for future generations.

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