

The Analogical Gateway to the Unseen: Maitreya's Verse and the Timeless Truth of the Lotus Sutra

Executive Summary: The Analogical Gateway to the Unseen

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the verse spoken by Maitreya in Chapter 15 of the Lotus Sutra. The analysis demonstrates that Maitreya's inquiry is not a sign of literal disbelief but a critical narrative and pedagogical device that unlocks the central, esoteric teachings of the sutra. The analogy of the young father and his ancient sons serves as a profound bridge, moving the narrative from the apparent, historical reality of the Buddha's life to the ultimate, timeless truth of his eternal nature and the inherent Buddhahood within all beings. This report will demonstrate how the unfolding narrative—from a cosmic unveiling to Maitreya's pivotal inquiry and the Buddha's ultimate revelation—is a deliberate, compassionate act of teaching, revealing the profound unity of the universe and the mission of its enlightened inhabitants.

I. Introduction: The Assembly on Vulture Peak and a Cosmic Unveiling

The Lotus Sutra's fifteenth chapter, "Welling Forth from the Earth," sets a dramatic stage for one of its most profound revelations. The narrative begins with a great assembly on Vulture Peak, attended by countless Bodhisattvas Mahasattvas from other lands. These enlightened beings have gathered to hear Shakyamuni Buddha preach the Dharma and have volunteered to propagate the sutra in the *Saha* world, the world of endurance, after the Buddha's passing.¹ Shakyamuni, however, declines their offer, stating that there is no need, as the

Saha world already has its own host of great Bodhisattvas to carry out this crucial task.³

This declaration immediately precedes a sudden and inconceivable event. The earth in the three thousand great thousand lands of the Saha world trembles and splits open, and from its depths, an immeasurable host of Bodhisattvas Mahasattvas simultaneously wells forth.¹ These beings are described as having golden-hued bodies, the thirty-two marks of a great being, and limitless light, and they had been dwelling in the "empty space beneath the Saha world".¹ The appearance of this vast multitude, each accompanied by a retinue numbering as many as the sand grains of tens of thousands of Ganges Rivers, is designed to challenge conventional perception and understanding.²

II. Part I: The Paradox of a Young Father and His Ancient Sons

The sudden, bewildering appearance of this colossal assembly of Bodhisattvas is the catalyst for the central inquiry of the chapter, articulated by Maitreya Bodhisattva. Maitreya, whose name derives from the Sanskrit word *maitrī* ("friendship") and who is prophesied to be the future Buddha of this world, serves as the voice of the astonished assembly.⁶ He expresses his perplexity by asking who these Bodhisattvas are, where they came from, and who taught them.² The Buddha replies that these Bodhisattvas are his "original disciples" whom he has been teaching and transforming since long ago.³

This response creates a profound paradox, which Maitreya frames with a powerful analogy: "It is as difficult as to believe a handsome black-haired man 25 years old who points to men 100 years old and says they are my sons or as to believe men 100 years old who point to a young man and say this is our father he brought us up." The "handsome man, 25 years old" represents the historical Shakyamuni, who is perceived by the assembly to have only attained enlightenment a mere "forty-odd years" ago.¹ The "men 100 years old" symbolize the newly emerged Bodhisattvas, who, by virtue of their immense spiritual powers and inconceivable wisdom, are clearly figures of great antiquity who have been cultivating themselves for "innumerable kalpas".¹ The central question is stark and direct: how could a young teacher have disciples who are ancient and vastly more advanced?

The significance of Maitreya's inquiry lies in its pedagogical function. His doubt is not a sign of his personal lack of faith, as the text clarifies that he and the assembly fully believe the Buddha's truthful words.¹ Instead, Maitreya's question is a deliberate and compassionate act. He articulates the paradox not for his own sake but "for the sake of people in the future who may have doubts about this point".³ By voicing the most difficult, counter-intuitive question on

behalf of the assembly, Maitreya creates the perfect narrative opening for the Buddha to deliver the most profound and essential teaching of the sutra. His inquiry serves as the necessary catalyst for the revelation of the Eternal Buddha, demonstrating how a seemingly simple act of questioning can facilitate the transmission of a profound and liberating truth.

Table 1: The Function of Maitreya's Doubt in Chapter 15

Aspect	Description
Queryer	Bodhisattva Maitreya, the future Buddha and a figure of immense compassion.
Immediate Audience	The assembled Bodhisattvas from other lands and the rest of the fourfold assembly on Vulture Peak.
The Question	Who taught these countless, immensely powerful Bodhisattvas, and how could it have happened in the mere 40 years since Shakyamuni's enlightenment? ¹
The Stated Purpose	To resolve the doubts of the assembly and prevent future practitioners from "rejecting the Law" due to disbelief. ¹
The Ultimate Function	To serve as a skillful means (<i>upaya</i>) for the Buddha to reveal his true, eternal nature and the ultimate truth of the "One Vehicle". ⁵

III. Part II: The Philosophical Resolution: The Eternal Buddha and the Reality of Time

The profound contradiction posed by Maitreya's analogy is resolved in the following chapter,

"The Life Span of the Thus Come One." Here, Shakyamuni Buddha reveals that he did not, in fact, attain enlightenment in his historical lifetime in India, but has been a Buddha since the "inconceivably remote past".¹³ This revelation reframes his historical life as a temporary and provisional manifestation, an act of "skillful means" (

upaya) designed to inspire and guide beings.¹¹ The Buddha's entire teaching career is thus revealed to be a series of pedagogically tailored methods intended to lead people to the ultimate truth of the "One Vehicle" (

ekayāna).⁵ The apparent contradictions between his provisional teachings and the ultimate truth are resolved by this understanding; all paths are part of a single, supreme path to Buddhahood.⁵

This narrative resolution has given rise to a core hermeneutical framework in East Asian Buddhism. The Chinese Tiantai scholar Zhiyi (538–597) divided the Lotus Sutra into two major sections: the "trace teaching" and the "origin teaching".¹³ The first fourteen chapters, the trace teaching (

shakumon), are about the historical Shakyamuni who attained enlightenment in India. The latter fourteen chapters, from Chapter 15 onward, constitute the origin teaching (*honmon*), which reveals the true, eternal Buddha. The analogy of the young father and centenarians thus serves as a perfect narrative representation of the transition from the trace to the origin. It is the narrative hinge upon which the entire sutra pivots from a provisional teaching to a direct and ultimate revelation of the Buddha's timeless nature. This reconciliation of apparent contradictions is a central genius of the Lotus Sutra's teaching, re-contextualizing all previous teachings within a grand, cosmic, and timeless framework that unifies the phenomenal and the noumenal.

IV. Part III: The Symbolic Meaning and Mission of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth

The Bodhisattvas who welled forth from the earth are not merely a narrative device but powerful symbols of the Lotus Sutra's core teachings. The text describes them as an innumerable host led by four specific Bodhisattvas: Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices, and Firmly Established Practices.³ Their golden bodies and immense spiritual powers signify their status as the Buddha's original, most advanced disciples.¹ The text further notes that their retinues vary in size, from as many as the sand grains of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers down to a single follower, suggesting a tiered yet unified mission.¹

The most profound symbolism of these Bodhisattvas is found in their origin: they emerge not from a distant Pure Land but from "beneath the Saha world".¹ This is in direct contrast to the Bodhisattvas from other worlds who had originally volunteered to propagate the Dharma.³ This act of emergence from the earth signifies their intimate, karmic connection to our world of suffering. They are figures of immanent liberation, deeply rooted in the very ground they are tasked with saving. This narrative event foreshadows the philosophical doctrine of

hongaku (original enlightenment) prevalent in East Asian Buddhism, which holds that enlightenment is not something to be attained externally but is an intrinsic reality to be revealed from within.¹⁶ The Bodhisattvas' emergence from a place of hidden potential parallels the idea that Buddha-nature is dormant within every being in this world, waiting to be awakened. Their "welling forth" is a dynamic process of this innate potential being realized, linking the narrative to the profound concept that our enlightenment is already present, waiting to be recognized.

Table 2: The Bodhisattvas of the Earth: A Profile of their Mission and Symbolism

Characteristic	Symbolic and Doctrinal Meaning
Welling forth from beneath the earth	Signifies an intimate, karmic connection to the <i>Saha</i> world. ⁷ Their origin symbolizes the immanence of Buddhahood within the world of suffering.
Golden-hued bodies, great spiritual powers, and inconceivable wisdom	Represents their status as the Buddha's original, most advanced disciples. ¹ Their appearance demonstrates the boundless power of the Mystic Law.
Entrusted with the mission of propagating the Lotus Sutra	They are the inheritors of the Buddha's will. Their mission ensures the continuity of the Dharma in the "Latter Day of the Law," a corrupt age after the Buddha's passing. ⁷

V. Part IV: The Modern and Sectarian Interpretations

The revelations of the Lotus Sutra have been a source of diverse and influential interpretations across various Mahayana traditions. The Tiantai school, founded by Zhiyi, systematically integrated the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, viewing the revelation of the Eternal Buddha as the core of the "origin teaching" which unifies the three Buddha bodies into a single, eternal reality.¹³ This framework provided a comprehensive doctrinal exegesis of the sutra, serving as a basis for spiritual contemplation.¹⁹

For Nichiren Buddhism, the doctrines of Chapters 15 and 16 are particularly central and are interpreted with a focus on contemporary application. Nichiren Daishonin identified himself as the "votary of the Lotus Sutra" who fulfilled the prophecy of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the "Latter Day of the Law," the age when the Buddha's teachings would be disregarded.⁷ For this tradition, the mission of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is not a historical event but a contemporary, living reality. Practitioners of Nichiren Buddhism are seen as modern-day Bodhisattvas of the Earth, who, by engaging in the "great vow" of spreading the Mystic Law, are fulfilling the Buddha's will and transforming the suffering-filled

Saha world into a pure land.¹⁸

This mission is articulated through the principle of "changing poison into medicine." This concept means that earthly desires, karma, and suffering—the "three paths"—can be transformed into the three virtues of a Buddha—Dharma body, wisdom, and emancipation—by the power of the Mystic Law.²¹ This provides a practical framework for practitioners to view personal hardships as opportunities for profound inner transformation. The concept of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth thus moves from a cosmic event to a personal and collective mission, linking the individual's inner revolution to a revolution for all humanity, demonstrating that "great disaster without fail changes into great fortune".²⁰

The revelation of the Eternal Buddha in Chapter 16 is interpreted by some traditions as signifying the truth that the life of every being is one with this Buddha. The Eternal Buddha of this chapter means "all living beings".²² This perspective posits that ordinary people are "Buddhas just as they are," and the only meaningful distinction between individuals is the extent to which they realize this in their hearts.²² Maitreya's question and its resolution ultimately point to this fundamental truth: the ultimate reality of life is already present, waiting to be revealed from within.

Table 3: The Eternal Buddha: Comparative Doctrinal Interpretations

School	Interpretation of the Eternal Buddha
Tiantai	The unification of the three Buddha bodies (Dharma body, reward body, and manifested body). The Buddha's life on Earth was a temporary, skillful means. This concept forms the core of the "origin teaching". ¹³
Nichiren Buddhism	The Eternal Buddha is not an external deity but represents the innate Buddha-nature in all living beings. ²² This concept empowers ordinary people to realize they are "Buddhas just as they are". ²²
Pure Land Buddhism	Amida Buddha is often considered the eternal Buddha who manifested as Shakyamuni. His vow is the central focus of practice, allowing for rebirth in his pure land. ¹³
Shingon Buddhism	Vairochana Buddha is the personification of the Dharmakaya, the ultimate truth, and is revered as the eternal Buddha. ¹³

VI. Conclusion: Maitreya's Inquiry and the Timeless Compassion of the Buddha

Maitreya's verse in Chapter 15 of the Lotus Sutra and the analogy it contains are not a sign of confusion but the pivotal moment of the entire sutra. Maitreya's compassionate inquiry, made on behalf of the assembly and for the benefit of future generations, compels the Buddha to reveal a truth that transcends the limits of conventional time and space. The revelation of the Eternal Buddha, who has been teaching for countless eons, resolves the apparent contradiction and re-contextualizes his historical life as a provisional, skillful means to lead beings to the ultimate truth of their own inherent Buddhahood.

The symbolism of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth further reinforces this teaching. Their emergence from beneath the Saha world signifies a deep, karmic connection to the world of

suffering, making them immanent figures of liberation. This narrative event provides a powerful metaphorical foundation for the doctrine of *hongaku* (original enlightenment), suggesting that enlightenment is not an external attainment but a profound recognition of an inner, intrinsic reality.

The enduring relevance of this passage lies in its ability to reconcile the historical and the eternal, the phenomenal and the noumenal. It moves the practitioner's focus from an external savior to an internal, transformative mission. It provides a profound doctrinal framework that empowers individuals by revealing that the Buddha's wisdom and compassion are not limited by historical time but are perpetually available to those who, like the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, vow to fulfill the Buddha's mission in the world of suffering. The Lotus Sutra, through Maitreya's sincere question, teaches that true enlightenment is not an escape from reality but the courageous act of transforming it from within.

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