

The Fearless Vow of Entrustment: Exegesis of Chapter 13 of the Lotus Sūtra and its Doctrinal Function in the Propagation of the Dharma

I. Introduction: Contextualizing the Exhortation to Keep

A. The Structural Division of the Lotus Sūtra

The *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*) holds a unique position within Mahayana literature, particularly in East Asian traditions such as Tiantai (Tendai) and Nichiren Buddhism, where its structure is rigorously analyzed. Doctrinally, the text is typically divided into two primary sections: the Theoretical Teaching (*Shakumon*, encompassing Chapters 1–14) and the Essential Teaching (*Honmon*, Chapters 15–28).¹ This division establishes a progressive unveiling of Śākyamuni Buddha's ultimate identity and the capacity of all beings for enlightenment.

Chapter 13, titled "Encouraging Devotion" (*Kan Ji*), serves as the climactic conclusion of the Theoretical Section. It represents the culmination of the preparatory teachings, during which the Buddha utilized expedient means to guide his disparate followers toward the *Ekayāna* (One Vehicle). This chapter's function is critical, resolving the preparatory phase of the teaching by confirming the spiritual capability and profound commitment of the assembled disciples, thereby setting the immediate stage for the revelation of the Buddha's eternal nature in Chapter 15.¹ The declaration of the vow, therefore, functions as a decisive declaration of intent, which, in turn, necessitates the subsequent, deeper doctrinal revelation of the true propagators.

B. Textual Analysis of the Vow Verses

The core passage under analysis—"Because we are your messengers, We are fearless before multitudes. We will expound the Dharma. Buddha, do not worry!"—encapsulates the Bodhisattva spirit of unwavering dedication and the essential commitment to *kosen-rufu* (widespread propagation of the Dharma).

The phrasing "We are your messengers" establishes the Bodhisattvas' subordinate yet essential role. They are not acting based on their own self-generated mission but acknowledge Śākyamuni's authority, indicating that their actions are taken upon the Buddha's prior command to uphold and disseminate the Sutra after his eventual passing.² This acknowledgment is pivotal, as it frames the mission as one of delegated authority. This implicit reliance on delegated authority suggests that, while their commitment is pure, it may ultimately be insufficient when compared to the inherent, original mandate required for the ultimate propagation task—a mandate reserved for the Bodhisattvas of the Earth revealed later in the text.

The closing declaration, "Buddha, do not worry!" carries significant weight. It conveys absolute confidence in the Bodhisattvas' spiritual capacity and resolve, stemming from their realization of the Dharma, despite the extreme difficulties and hostility they know they will face.² This phrase asserts a readiness to face any challenge, declaring the mission's success to be assured through their sacrifice, thereby assuaging any concern the World Honored One might harbor regarding the future preservation of the Dharma. The vow's intensity—promising not to spare their bodies and lives²—underscores this unwavering confidence.

II. Identity and Composition of the Votaries of Chapter 13

Chapter 13 details a multifaceted response to the Buddha's challenge regarding the maintenance of the Sutra in the future evil age. The identity of those making the vow clarifies the stage of spiritual development they represent within the *Lotus Sūtra*'s framework.

A. The Leading Bodhisattvas and the Vow Makers

The primary leaders of this enthusiastic response are the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Bhaiṣajyarāja (Medicine King) and the Bodhisattva Mahāsattva Mahāpratibhāna (Great Delight in Speaking), accompanied by an expansive retinue of twenty thousand Bodhisattvas.² They step forward to make a profound vow to "reverently maintain, read, recite, and explain this Sutra" following the Buddha's extinction, explicitly recognizing and accepting the inevitable hostility of the evil ages to come.²

These Bodhisattvas are doctrinally identified as figures who have traveled from "other lands," or Buddha-worlds outside of the Saha world (this world of suffering).³ They represent the universal Mahayana ideal of salvation—Bodhisattvas who have attained great compassion and wisdom through the teaching of Śākyamuni Buddha. Their sincerity is unquestionable, but their origin from other realms implies their connection to the Saha world is relatively less profound than that of the disciples who have practiced here over eons.

B. The Fulfillment of the Theoretical Teaching: Predictions for the Saṅgha

The chapter simultaneously functions as the completion of the *Ekayāna* promise by conferring final *vyākaraṇa* (predictions of future Buddhahood) upon the major disciples who had previously been restricted to the *Hīnayāna* path.

The assembly witnesses the Arhats (those "beyond study") and others (those "still studying"), numbering eight thousand in total, receiving their predictions and, in turn, rising to make their own solemn vow. They pledge to propagate the Sutra extensively, but significantly, their commitment is directed toward "other lands".² This commitment validates their enlightenment through the

Ekayāna path but restricts their mission geographically, implicitly distinguishing their capacity from the ultimate responsibility for the troubled Saha world.

Crucially, Chapter 13 fulfills the universal promise of the Sutra by addressing the Bhikshuni assembly. The Buddha grants prophecies to the six thousand nuns present, including the vitally important figures of Mahāprajāpatī (Śākyamuni's foster mother, Gautami) and Yaśodharā (his former wife).² By granting these women predictions of future Buddhahood, the chapter confirms the radical inclusivity of the

Lotus Sūtra's doctrine, proving that the highest enlightenment is accessible to women and cementing the foundational truth that all expedient paths lead to the One Vehicle. The

spiritual integration of all previously disparate classes of disciples—Arhats, Bhikshunis, and great Bodhisattvas—making vows or receiving predictions, confirms that the preliminary phase of the teaching is complete. Every class of practitioner now possesses the spiritual capacity for highest enlightenment, establishing a necessary precondition for the revelation of the source of this capacity.

This section is summarized in the following table detailing the key responses in Chapter 13.

Table 1: Key Votaries and Prophecies in Lotus Sūtra Chapter 13

Votary Group	Lead Figures	Type of Vow/Pledge	Doctrinal Significance
Bodhisattva Mahāsattvas (from Other Lands)	Bhaiṣajyarāja and Mahāpratibhāna	Fearless Vow to uphold the Sutra in the evil age, regardless of cost. ²	The highest dedication attained through the Buddha's expedient teachings.
Arhats and Students	Five Hundred Arhats, Eight Thousand Bhikkhus/Bhikkhunis	Vow to speak the Sutra extensively in other lands. ²	Confirmation of <i>Ekayāna</i> for Hinayana practitioners.
Bhikshunis	Mahāprajāpatī and Yaśodharā (6,000 in total)	Received specific predictions of future Buddhahood. ⁵	Affirmation of universal enlightenment, including women, concluding the predictions in the Theoretical Section.

III. The Significance of the Fearless Vow (*Abhaya*)

The core assertion, "We are fearless before multitudes," elevates the Chapter 13 vow beyond a

simple promise of effort into a declaration of fundamental spiritual realization.

A. The Nature of the Vow: Propagation and Perseverance

The vow commits the Bodhisattvas to fulfilling the four core actions of a Dharma Master: maintaining, reading, reciting, and explaining (preaching) the Sutra.² This commitment is issued under the explicit recognition that the future age will be intensely hostile. The anticipated recipients of the teaching are characterized as having "scanty merit and virtue," diminishing "good roots," and being "increasingly arrogant, greedy for benefits and offerings, [and] difficult to teach and transform".²

The commitment, therefore, necessitates "great power of patience" (*kṣānti*) to bear up under the onslaught of evil events, demonstrating that perseverance is inseparable from the act of propagation in a defiled world.²

B. Analysis of *Abhaya* (Fearlessness) in Mahayana Doctrine

The declaration of fearlessness (*Abhaya*) is a profound statement regarding the Bodhisattvas' spiritual state. In Mahayana doctrine, *Abhaya* is not merely emotional bravery but a deep, spiritual security derived from the unwavering certainty regarding the True Dharma.⁷ This certainty eliminates all fear, enabling the Buddha and advanced Bodhisattvas to guide others with absolute conviction.⁷ This profound sense of security is often symbolized by the

Abhaya Mudra, the hand gesture of fearlessness.⁹

The vow in Chapter 13 indicates that these Bodhisattvas have attained the necessary level of realization to eliminate fundamental spiritual doubt concerning their own path and their capacity to teach others. This certainty is required because the propagation of the ultimate truth, as detailed later in the text, requires engaging in spiritual conflict. The fact that *Abhaya* must be invoked proves that persecution is an inherent and guaranteed aspect of the mission. If the spreading of the Dharma were easy, such a declaration of intrinsic fearlessness would be superfluous.

C. The Ultimate Commitment: Not Sparing Body and Life

The most absolute measure of their dedication is the pledge to endure hardship, stating they will fulfill their mission "not sparing our very bodies and lives" and are "anxious only for the unsurpassed way".² This language establishes a standard of self-sacrificial commitment, transforming the act of upholding the Sutra into a potentially life-threatening endeavor.

This self-sacrifice serves as a moral and spiritual benchmark. The vow sets the ethical standard for the conduct of the true Dharma Votary. The ability to endure violent opposition—such as being attacked with "swords and staves"¹⁰—is contingent upon the spiritual realization encapsulated in the fearless vow. This commitment aligns with fundamental Bodhisattva precepts, requiring the maintenance of the path even when facing personal destruction, linking the vow to the rigorous ethical standards emphasized by later commentators such as Zhiyi (Zhiyi) and the importance of the Bodhisattva vows.¹² The intensity of this vow, therefore, sets the necessary floor for the level of dedication required for any practitioner attempting to spread the ultimate teaching in the defiled world.

IV. The Prophetic Context: The Evil Age and the Three Powerful Enemies

The significance of the Chapter 13 vow is heightened by the explicit prophecy of the persecution that the votaries will face, confirming that their suffering is not accidental but preordained.

A. Defining the Evil Age (*Mappō*)

The Bodhisattvas' pledge is specifically aimed at the future "evil ages," a period characterized by the decline of good roots, pervasive arrogance, and moral corruption.² This era is traditionally identified in East Asian Buddhism as the Latter Day of the Law (

Mappō), a time when true spiritual practice and enlightenment become exceedingly difficult.

A key marker of this evil age is the dramatic inversion of truth: those who genuinely preach the true Dharma will be unjustly slandered as holding "deviant views" or preaching "externalist doctrine," while false exponents of deviant Dharma will be regarded as authentic teachers.¹⁴ This condition justifies the Bodhisattvas' need for the highest level of conviction and patience,

as they must withstand not only external societal disapproval but also organized religious hostility. The text mandates that conflict is intrinsic to the mission, signaling that the act of spreading the ultimate teaching naturally provokes intense resistance.

B. Classification of Persecution: The Three Powerful Enemies

The concluding verse section of Chapter 13 provides a detailed description of the persecutions, which were later systematized by the great Tiantai master Miao-lo (711–782) into the canonical "Three Powerful Enemies".¹¹ This classification transforms the generalized prophecy into a specific, identifiable mechanism for testing the authenticity of the Dharma propagator.

The three categories of persecutors are defined by their method of attack and status ¹¹:

1. **Arrogant lay people:** Characterized by physical hostility, they "will curse and speak ill of us / and will attack us with swords and staves".¹¹
2. **Arrogant priests (monks):** These individuals, motivated by profound hatred and jealousy, despise, hate, envy, or bear grudges against those who maintain and preach the Sutra.¹⁶
3. **Arrogant false sages:** This is the most insidious category—high-ranking priests who have attained false fame and conspire with secular authorities (kings, ministers, Brahmans) to persecute the votaries through state-sanctioned violence, false accusations, banishment, or exile.¹¹

The textual emphasis on persecution by religious authorities who manipulate secular power suggests that the gravest threat to the Dharma comes not from external forces or ignorance, but from internal corruption and spiritual arrogance.¹⁴ The prediction of persecution is so detailed and specific that, in subsequent traditions, the actual encounter with the Three Powerful Enemies became objective, incontrovertible proof that a practitioner was upholding the true Dharma in the designated evil age.¹¹

V. Doctrinal Function: The Theoretical Vow and the Essential Revelation

Despite the absolute dedication and fearless commitment demonstrated in Chapter 13, the primary function of this vow is to serve as a high-water mark of the Theoretical Teaching,

defining the qualifications of practitioners before the ultimate truth is revealed.

A. The Challenge of Entrustment and the Buddha's Inquiry

Chapter 13 occurs immediately following the Buddha's challenge, first issued in Chapter 11, asking who is capable of safeguarding and preaching the *Lotus Sūtra* after he enters *Nirvāṇa*.³ The fearless vow of Bhaisajyarāja and the twenty thousand Bodhisattvas represents the most comprehensive response from the assembly gathered through expedient means. They pledge their devotion in the presence of the World Honored One and the Buddhas who have come from the ten directions, affirming their commitment to the full extent of their capability.²

B. The Structural Rejection of the Chapter 13 Vow

The subsequent unfolding of the *Lotus Sūtra* narrative reveals that, despite the profound sincerity and willingness to sacrifice their very lives², the Buddha effectively rejects the offer of the Chapter 13 Bodhisattvas in Chapter 15 ("Emerging from the Earth"). This rejection is a critical narrative device that shifts the focus from generalized Mahayana aspiration to a specialized, essential mandate.

Tiantai commentary articulates three primary reasons why the offers from Bodhisattvas assembled from other lands were ultimately set aside³:

1. **Conflicting Duties:** The Bodhisattvas from other lands had inherent "duties of their own to perform in their own lands." Accepting their offer would have caused them to neglect the propagation of the Dharma elsewhere.
2. **Superficial Connection:** Their ties with the Saha world were considered "of a superficial nature," meaning they lacked the deep, enduring karmic connection required to effectively teach and transform the particularly turbulent beings of this realm.
3. **Necessity of Revelation:** Accepting their help would have prevented the Buddha from summoning the Bodhisattvas of the Earth. The summoning of these original disciples was essential for the central purpose of the *Honmon* (Essential Teaching)—namely, to "open the near and reveal the distant," which means putting aside his transient, historical identity and revealing his attainment of enlightenment in the far distant past.³

The doctrinal necessity of this rejection is paramount. If the universal dedication of the Chapter 13 Bodhisattvas was sufficient to guarantee propagation in the evil age, the revelation of the Eternal Buddha (Chapter 16) and his original disciples (Chapter 15) would have been

redundant. The rejection, therefore, serves to establish that the true mission demands a connection that transcends mere assembly—it must be founded on the deepest, most original, and persistent bond with the Eternal Buddha's life span.

C. The Emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth

The task of propagation in the evil age is ultimately entrusted to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, who emerge dramatically from beneath the ground in Chapter 15.¹ These Bodhisattvas are revealed to be the Buddha's true disciples, personally instructed and trained by him over immeasurable ages.¹⁸ They possess "profound and widespread connections" with the Saha world, making them the only suitable inheritors of the responsibility for

kosen-rufu (widespread propagation).³

The distinction between the two groups is highlighted by the description of the Chapter 13 Bodhisattvas and those from other worlds being filled with awe upon seeing the Earth Bodhisattvas, with one commentary suggesting the prior assembly "seemed like a pack of apes or monkeys" compared to the golden splendor of the newcomers.¹⁹ This contrast underscores the hierarchical difference in spiritual origin and mandate. The Earth Bodhisattvas inherit the great desire of the eternal Buddha: to cause living beings to "gain entry into the unsurpassed way and quickly acquire the body of a buddha".¹⁸ The intensity of the Chapter 13 vow ("not sparing our bodies") sets the ethical benchmark, but the Earth Bodhisattvas fuse this intensity with their eternal mandate, providing the necessary inherent authority for the ultimate mission.

The fundamental doctrinal contrast between the two groups is summarized below:

Table 2: Doctrinal Contrast: Chapter 13 Votaries vs. Bodhisattvas of the Earth (Chapter 15)

Feature	Chapter 13 Bodhisattvas (Theoretical Entrustment)	Chapter 15 Bodhisattvas of the Earth (Essential Entrustment)
Origin	From other lands, assembled for the current teaching. ³	Emerged from beneath the Saha world; instructed by the Eternal Buddha. ¹⁸
Relationship to Buddha	Disciples who gathered	The Buddha's true,

	due to the Buddha's transcendental powers; temporary connection.	long-standing disciples; profound and widespread connection. ³
Fate of Vow	Rejected by the Buddha as having "superficial nature" of ties to the Saha world. ³	Accepted by the Buddha; entrusted with the core mission of <i>kosen-rufu</i> (widespread propagation). ¹⁸
Primary Goal	To spread the Sutra generally after extinction.	To actualize the Buddha's desire for the enlightenment of all people in the Latter Day. ¹⁸

VI. Historical and Sectarian Interpretation

The vow and prophecy detailed in Chapter 13 have profoundly shaped the doctrines of major East Asian Buddhist schools, particularly regarding the identity and mission of the true Dharma practitioner in challenging ages.

A. Tiantai/Tendai Exegesis

The Tiantai school, founded by Zhiyi (Zhiyi), placed Chapter 13 firmly within the framework of the Theoretical Teaching (*Shakumon*).¹ For Zhiyi, the vow embodies the essential commitment of the Bodhisattva path, which is reflected in the canonical Four Great Vows.¹² This systematic analysis ensured that the promises made in Chapter 13 established the comprehensive ethical and spiritual foundation necessary before the revelation of the deeper, essential truth.

The greatest analytical contribution to this chapter came from Miao-lo (711–782), who codified the specific forms of resistance predicted in the text into the detailed categories of the Three Powerful Enemies.¹¹ This precise classification formalized the understanding that the resistance faced by the Votary of the

Lotus Sūtra is not generalized difficulty, but a set of predictable, insidious attacks rooted in

religious jealousy and arrogance.¹⁷

B. Nichiren Buddhism and the Fulfillment of the Prophecy

The Japanese Buddhist reformer Nichiren Daishonin (1222–1282) utilized Chapter 13, which he often referred to as the "Fortitude" chapter, as a central pillar of his doctrinal proof. For Nichiren, the detailed prophecy of persecution provided objective evidence that validated his identity as the true Votary of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the Latter Day of the Law (*Mappō*).¹⁵

Nichiren argued that the persecutions he faced—including repeated slander, physical attacks, and exile by secular authorities who were often manipulated by rival arrogant priests—were the literal fulfillment of the attacks foretold in Chapter 13.¹¹ He asserted that if the

Lotus Sūtra truly contained the ultimate teaching for the evil age, then the three powerful enemies predicted within it *must* appear to persecute its propagator; otherwise, the Sutra's words would be unreliable.¹¹ Thus, the very existence of his suffering became the ultimate confirmation of the correctness of his practice.¹⁵

C. Temporal Linkage and the Soteriological Drama

Nichiren extended this interpretation by linking the prophecy of future suffering in Chapter 13 to the historical example of past suffering described in Chapter 20, "Bodhisattva Never Disparaging." He maintained that his present trials (foretold in Chapter 13) were the karmic expiation for having slandered the Dharma in prior lifetimes, paralleling the trials of Bodhisattva Never Disparaging.¹⁰

This sophisticated linkage suggests a non-linear interpretation of time and karma within the Sutra's narrative, where the challenges faced by the Dharma Votary are eternally recurring. By accepting his persecution as expiation for past sins, Nichiren effectively placed himself on the same spiritual level as the people he sought to save, uniting both the Votary and his opponents in a vast "soteriological drama of sin, expiation, and the realization of buddhahood" centered around the *Lotus Sūtra*.¹⁰ The fearless vow of Chapter 13 is thus seen as the active agent that catalyzes this process of profound karmic purification.

VII. Conclusion: The Legacy of Chapter 13 and the Continuous Vow

Chapter 13 of the *Lotus Sūtra* presents a fundamental doctrinal moment: the confirmation of the spiritual capacity attained by the assembled disciples and their fearless commitment to the propagation of the ultimate truth in a hostile world. The verses, "Because we are your messengers, We are fearless before multitudes. We will expound the Dharma. Buddha, do not worry!" encapsulate the spirit of *Abhaya* (fearlessness) and *kṣānti* (patience) required of the Dharma Votary.

The primary function of this commitment, however, is structural. The comprehensive and sincere vows of Bhaisajyaraṇa and the Bodhisattvas from other lands serve as the necessary conclusion to the Theoretical Teaching, simultaneously setting an absolute ethical benchmark for dedication—"not sparing our bodies or lives"—and confirming the universal efficacy of the *Ekayāna* path by granting predictions to all previous assemblies.

The subsequent rejection of this offer clarifies that the mission to propagate the Sutra in the defiled Saha world demands a connection deeper than universal aspiration. It requires the inherent authority and profound karmic ties possessed only by the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, who emerge in Chapter 15. Nonetheless, the legacy of Chapter 13 endures as the definitive statement on the inevitable conflict between the supreme Dharma and the spiritual corruption of the evil age, providing the essential prophecy—the Three Powerful Enemies—that defines the authenticity of the true practitioner across all time.¹¹ The vow stands as a timeless paradigm, illustrating that the widespread propagation of the ultimate truth requires not only compassion and wisdom but a fearless, self-sacrificial resolve to embrace suffering as proof of one's conviction.

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