The Limitless Sky of Merit: An Analysis of Devotional Practice in Chapter 17 of the *Lotus Sūtra*

Introduction: The Heart of Devotion in the King of Sūtras

Among the vast corpus of Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures, few have commanded the reverence, inspired the devotion, or shaped the religious landscape of East Asia as profoundly as *The Sutra on the White Lotus of the Sublime Dharma* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*), commonly known as the *Lotus Sūtra*.[1] Revered as the "King of Sūtras," it is a text celebrated not only for its philosophical depth but for its powerful appeal to the heart, presenting a vision of universal salvation that has resonated with countless practitioners for centuries. A quintessential expression of this devotional ethos is found in its seventeenth chapter, "Discrimination of Merit and Virtue," which contains the following promise:

> Anyone who not only understands this sūtra by faith but also keeps, reads and recites it, and copies it, or causes others to copy it, and strews flowers, incense, and incense powder to a copy of it, and lights lamps of the perfumed oil of sumanas, campaka, and atimuktaka around the copy of this sūtra and offers the light thus produced to it, will be able to obtain innumerable merits. His merits will be as limitless as the sky.

This passage presents a seemingly straightforward, almost transactional, model of religious practice: perform a specific set of reverential acts and receive a boundless reward. However, to interpret this verse merely as a list of rituals is to miss the sophisticated soteriological framework it encapsulates. The core investigation of this report is to deconstruct this apparent simplicity, revealing how these tangible, physical acts—faith, recitation, copying, and offerings—function as a bridge to the sūtra's most profound and abstract truths. These truths, which form the bedrock of Mahāyāna Buddhism, include the eternal nature of the Buddha, the

universal potential for all beings to achieve enlightenment, and the Bodhisattva's compassionate path of transforming personal suffering into a universal aspiration for the benefit of all.[1]

This report argues that the devotional practices outlined in Chapter 17 are not merely preliminary steps or expressions of uncritical belief. They are presented as a direct and efficacious form of "skillful means" (*upāya*), a core doctrine of the sūtra, which allows practitioners of all capacities to engage with, internalize, and ultimately actualize the Buddha's supreme wisdom. The "limitless merit" promised is not a simple karmic reward but the very transformative power that purifies the mind, reorients one's life toward the Bodhisattva ideal, and makes the reality of the Buddha's Pure Land immanent in this present world.[4] To fully unpack this claim, this analysis will proceed through a multi-layered exploration. It will begin with a close textual reading of Chapter 17, followed by a deep analysis of the concept of merit (*puṇya*) and the specific devotional acts prescribed. It will then situate these practices within the broader context of the Bodhisattva ideal and trace their historical interpretation through the influential Tiantai, Tendai, and Nichiren schools of East Asian Buddhism. Finally, it will place this unique form of devotionalism into a comparative dialogue with other world religions, culminating in a conclusion that synthesizes these findings to reveal the profound spiritual technology at the heart of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Exegesis of "Discrimination of Merit and Virtue" (Chapter 17)

The seventeenth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, titled "Discrimination of Merit and Virtue" (*Fumbetsu Kudoku Hon*), cannot be understood in isolation. Its significance derives directly from its placement immediately following the doctrinal climax of the entire scripture: Chapter 16, "The Life Span of the Thus Come One".[2] In that pivotal chapter, Śākyamuni Buddha shatters the conventional understanding of his biography—his birth, renunciation, enlightenment, and impending *parinirvāṇa*—revealing them to be an elaborate display of skillful means (*upāya*).[2] His true nature, he declares, is that of a Buddha who attained enlightenment in the immeasurably distant past and whose life span is effectively eternal. He has never ceased to be present in this world, constantly working to guide beings to awakening.[2]

This revelation of the Buddha's eternal nature is a profound, almost overwhelming, truth. Chapter 17, therefore, serves a crucial pastoral and practical function. It answers the implicit question that arises in the minds of the assembly: "Now that we have heard this ultimate truth of the Buddha's eternality, how can we, as finite and deluded beings, possibly relate to, grasp, or benefit from it?" The answer provided by the sūtra is definitive: through the generation and

accumulation of merit, which is accessed primarily through acts of faith and devotion directed toward the sūtra that contains this very teaching.

The chapter opens by quantifying the immense benefits received by the assembly simply from *hearing* the discourse on the Buddha's eternal life. Using cosmic-scale hyperbole, the text states that living beings as numerous as the "sand grains in six hundred and eighty myriads of kotis of nayutas of Ganges rivers" gained "Patience with the Non-production of Dharmas," a high stage of insight.[7] It continues by describing Bodhisattvas as numerous as "dust motes in a great world system" who become capable of turning the "irreversible Dharma-wheel," meaning they are secured on the path to enlightenment and will never regress.[7] The text's use of ancient Indian cosmology—describing small, middle-sized, and "three-thousand great-thousand" world systems (a billion worlds)—is not intended as a literal cartography but as a literary device to convey a quantity of merit and a scale of attainment that is beyond ordinary human comprehension and calculation.[7] This establishes a baseline of benefit, setting the stage for the even more profound merit promised to those who move from passive hearing to active engagement.

A central argument of the chapter is the radical re-evaluation of the traditional Bodhisattva path, which was understood as the gradual perfection of the six *pāramitās* (perfections) over countless eons (*kalpas*). The sūtra presents a stunning comparison: if a person were to practice the five *pāramitās*—generosity, keeping the precepts, forbearance, assiduousness, and meditation—for "eight hundred thousand million nayutas of kalpas," their accumulated merit would be vast. However, the sūtra declares, if another person hears of the Buddha's eternal life span and "gives rise to even a single thought of faith, his or her blessings will exceed those of the person just described".[8] The merit from a single moment of profound faith is proclaimed to be incalculably greater, a sum that could not be known by "calculation or analogy".[8]

This represents a significant doctrinal pivot. The traditional model of spiritual progress, particularly in early Mahāyāna, can be understood as a process of "earning" enlightenment through immense personal effort and the gradual accumulation of merit and wisdom over an almost unimaginable length of time.[10] Chapter 17 does not negate this path but reframes the source of its efficacy. By asserting the supremacy of faith in the sūtra's ultimate truth, it suggests a shift in soteriology from a model based purely on self-power and "earning" to one that incorporates the power of the Dharma itself. The ultimate source of merit is not the practitioner's effort alone, but the inherent power of the truth revealed in the sūtra. The devotional acts, therefore, are not just about *generating* merit from scratch; they are the prescribed method for *aligning* oneself with the sūtra's power, thereby *receiving* the boundless merit of the eternal Buddha. This doctrinal emphasis on faith and the power inherent in the teaching itself would become a crucial foundation for later developments in East Asian Buddhism, particularly in the Pure Land and Nichiren traditions, which stress the importance of "other-power".[13]

Finally, the chapter makes clear that this profound faith cannot remain a purely internal, mental state. It must be expressed and embodied through concrete actions. The passage enumerates the specific practices of keeping, reading, reciting, copying, and making offerings, underscoring a core Mahāyāna principle: that abstract truth must be actualized through the coordinated engagement of body, speech, and mind. As one commentary notes, "To simply listen and know about merit and virtue, but not to do any acts of merit and virtue, will bring no merit and virtue".[7] The path to realizing the limitless sky of merit is paved with these tangible acts of devotion.

The Currency of Awakening: Understanding Merit (*Puṇya*) in Mahāyāna Thought

To grasp the full import of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s promise, it is essential to understand the concept of merit (*puṇya* in Sanskrit, *kudoku* in Japanese) not as a simple reward for good behavior, but as a dynamic, foundational element of the Buddhist path to awakening. Chapter 17 is titled "Discrimination of Merit and Virtue," and several commentaries make a crucial distinction between these two terms. Merit (*gong* in Chinese) is described as an external attribute, a beneficial force accumulated through wholesome deeds. Virtue (*de*) is the internal result: the state of purity, happiness, and spiritual clarity that arises within one's own nature from the presence of merit.[7] Merit is compared to a great mountain, built slowly from innumerable tiny particles of dust, while virtue is likened to the vast sea, filled over eons by countless rivers. This analogy emphasizes that merit and virtue are not the product of a single act but of sustained, dedicated practice.[7]

At its core, merit is a fundamental concept in Buddhist ethics, understood as a "beneficial and protective force" that accumulates as a result of good deeds, words, and thoughts.[12] It is the engine of positive karma. In the traditional Buddhist worldview, merit is what creates favorable circumstances, both in this life and in future rebirths. It is the cause of health, wealth, long life, and, most importantly, of encountering the Dharma and having the capacity to practice it.[12] Demerit (*pāpa*), conversely, leads to suffering and unfavorable conditions. Merit is thus the essential currency that fuels one's journey through *saṃsāra* and toward liberation.

While the concept of individual karmic accounting is present in all forms of Buddhism, the Mahāyāna tradition introduces a revolutionary expansion of this idea: the principle of merit transference (*pariṇāmanā*).[16] In this view, merit is not a fixed, personal "score" that is nontransferable. Instead, it is a dynamic, spiritual energy that can be dedicated or transferred from one being to another. This doctrine is the very mechanism that makes the Bodhisattva's compassionate work possible. A Bodhisattva engages in spiritual practice to generate vast

stores of merit, not for their own benefit, but with the express purpose of dedicating it to the welfare and enlightenment of all other sentient beings.[3]

This understanding radically reframes the purpose of the devotional acts described in Chapter 17. The practitioner who seeks to obtain "innumerable merits" is not engaging in a form of spiritual materialism, hoarding karmic wealth for a better future life. Rather, they are participating in the Bodhisattva's economy of compassion. The practices prescribed in the sūtra are the method for generating the immense spiritual capital required to fund the most ambitious project imaginable: the liberation of all beings from suffering. The act of generating merit and dedicating it to others is itself a profoundly meritorious act, creating a virtuous cycle where the very act of giving away merit generates even more merit for the giver.[19] This directly explains the sūtra's call to "transform our personal suffering into an aspiration to benefit all beings." The merit one accumulates becomes the fuel for that aspiration.

In the sophisticated doctrinal framework of Mahāyāna, the path to full Buddhahood is often described as the perfection of two distinct but inseparable accumulations: the accumulation of merit (*puṇya-saṃbhāra*) and the accumulation of wisdom (*jñāna-saṃbhāra*).[16] The accumulation of merit is generated through practices rooted in compassion, such as generosity (*dāna*), ethical conduct (*śīla*), and the devotional acts described in the *Lotus Sūtra*. This accumulation purifies the mind of karmic obscurations and creates the positive external and internal conditions necessary for deep insight. The accumulation of wisdom, on the other hand, is the direct, non-conceptual realization of ultimate reality, particularly the truth of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). The two work in tandem. One cannot achieve profound wisdom without the stable foundation provided by merit, and merit that is not guided by the ultimate aim of wisdom is incomplete. The practices enumerated in Chapter 17, therefore, are presented as a supreme method for perfecting the first of these two essential accumulations, paving the way for the dawn of ultimate wisdom.

The Path of the Five Practices: An Analysis of Devotional Acts

The *Lotus Sūtra* does not leave the path to limitless merit in the realm of abstraction. It specifies a series of interconnected physical, verbal, and mental disciplines, often referred to as the "five practices" of the teacher of the Law. Each of these acts—upholding the sūtra through faith, reading, reciting, and copying it, and making offerings to it—can be understood as a distinct spiritual technology designed to integrate the practitioner ever more deeply with the sūtra's ultimate truth.

The Foundation of the Path: Faith (*Śraddhā*), Keeping, Reading, and Reciting

The journey begins with faith (*śraddhā*). In Buddhism, this is not blind belief or uncritical submission to dogma, but rather a serene and confident commitment to the truth of the Buddha's teaching.[13] It is an act of trust that opens the heart and mind, making them receptive to the Dharma. Faith is the essential prerequisite, the gate through which one must pass to access the sūtra's power.[21] In the specific context of Chapter 17, this faith is directed toward the radical truth of the Buddha's eternal life span, a revelation that fundamentally reorients one's understanding of reality.[8] It is this act of profound, heartfelt acceptance that, as the sūtra claims, unlocks a store of merit greater than that gained from eons of ascetic practice.[10] Faith is the initial step on a path that leads to wisdom; it is the trust that motivates one to practice, and through practice, one gains direct experiential verification of the truth in which one initially placed one's faith.[13]

This foundational faith is then actualized through the practices of "keeping, reading, and reciting." To "keep" (*dhāraṇa*) the sūtra means to uphold its teachings in one's daily life, to live in accordance with its principles, and to protect it from being lost or denigrated. "Reading" and "reciting" are active, dynamic engagements with the physical text. Through these verbal acts, the Buddha's words are transformed from inert characters on a page into a living, resonant force. Recitation, in particular, functions as a form of meditation, unifying the practitioner's body (in the posture of recitation), speech (in the chanting of the words), and mind (in the concentration on the meaning), thereby aligning one's entire being with the Dharma.[22]

The Meditative Art of Oneness: The Significance of Sūtra Copying (*Shakyō*)

Among the practices listed, the act of copying the sūtra (*shakyō* in Japanese) holds a particularly profound significance in the East Asian Buddhist tradition. Historically, before the advent of printing technology, the manual transcription of scriptures was the primary method for disseminating the Buddhist teachings. This act was undertaken by people from all strata of society—from emperors and nobility commissioning lavish projects to ward off epidemics or pray for the dead, to individual monks and laypeople engaging in it as a personal devotional

practice.[22]

The practice of *shakyō* is far more than mere scribal work; it is a meticulous and deeply meditative discipline. It requires intense, unwavering concentration, forcing the practitioner to engage with the text on the most intimate level, character by character.[22] This process naturally calms and purifies the mind, fostering a state of single-pointed focus similar to that achieved in formal meditation (*samādhi*).[22] The physical act of holding the brush, the scent of the ink, and the silent focus create a sacred space for what is considered a direct dialogue with the Buddha.[26]

The soteriological claims associated with sūtra copying are extraordinary. The *Lotus Sūtra* itself is interpreted as stating that the very act of copying can lead to supreme enlightenment.[27] This is because the practice is understood to facilitate a state of profound unification where the conventional distinctions between the subject (the copier), the object (the sūtra), and the action (the copying) dissolve. As one modern commentary explains, "You are one with copying and one with the sutra, truly sensing and feeling it. The action and object are easily unified".[27] In this state of oneness, the practitioner is not simply transcribing a text; they are embodying its truth. In some traditions, each character of the sūtra is seen as a manifestation of the Buddha himself, a concept known as "One Character, One Buddha".[26] Therefore, the completed copy is not just a book but a sacred relic, a physical manifestation of the Buddha's Dharma Body imbued with immense spiritual power. The practitioner is, in effect, "writing my life through my action of copying this most precious subtle dharma".[27]

This understanding of *shakyō* reveals its function as a form of somatic meditation that enacts one of Mahāyāna's core philosophical tenets: non-duality. While formal sitting meditation aims to realize the ultimate inseparability of subject and object through mental discipline, sūtra copying achieves a similar end through a physical discipline. It bypasses intellectual abstraction and allows the practitioner to directly experience the principle of non-duality. Through the focused, repetitive motion of the hand, the practitioner doesn't just *think* about the sūtra's truth; they *become* it. This makes *shakyō* a powerful bridge between the paths of devotion and meditation, embodying the sūtra's truth in the very fibers of one's being.

The Grammar of Offerings: Symbolism in Ritual

The final set of practices involves making offerings (*pūjā*) to a copy of the sūtra. In Buddhism, as in many religions, offerings are physical expressions of reverence, gratitude, and generosity (*dāna*), and are themselves considered powerful merit-making acts.[23] The specific items mentioned in the *Lotus Sūtra*—flowers, incense, and light—are not arbitrary decorative elements. They form a rich symbolic grammar, each element conveying a core aspect of the

Buddhist path.

Flowers (Puṣpa): Emblems of Impermanence and Purity

The offering of flowers is rich with meaning. First and foremost, flowers symbolize the fundamental Buddhist doctrine of **impermanence** (*anicca*). Their vibrant beauty is transient; they blossom, radiate, and inevitably wither and fade. This serves as a powerful, tangible reminder to the practitioner of the fleeting nature of all conditioned phenomena, including life itself.[29]

Simultaneously, flowers represent **purity and the potential for enlightenment**. The lotus flower (*padma*), the most iconic symbol in Buddhism and the namesake of the sūtra, provides the quintessential example. The lotus is rooted in the mud and murky water at the bottom of a pond, yet it rises above the surface to bloom, its petals pristine and unstained. This symbolizes the mind's innate capacity to rise above the "mud" of worldly suffering, attachment, and defilement to realize its inherent purity and achieve awakening.[29] The offering of beautiful and fragrant flowers like sumanas, campaka, and atimuktaka is therefore an expression of reverence and an aspiration to cultivate these same qualities of purity and wisdom within oneself.[32]

Incense (Dhūpa): The Fragrance of Moral Conduct

The offering of incense carries a similarly profound symbolic weight. The pure, pleasing fragrance of burning incense is understood to represent the "fragrance of pure moral conduct" (*śīla*).[34] Just as the scent of the incense spreads throughout the space, purifying it and delighting the senses, so too should the practitioner's virtue and ethical integrity pervade their life and positively influence the world around them. The Buddha is quoted as saying that the fragrance of virtue is sweeter than that of any flower and travels even against the wind.[35]

The rising smoke of the incense also symbolizes the practitioner's prayers, vows, and aspirations ascending to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.[36] Furthermore, the act of burning incense is seen as an act of **purification**. It cleanses the ritual space of negative energies and creates a tranquil, sacred atmosphere conducive to meditation and reverence.[36] On a deeper level, it serves as a reminder for the practitioner to "burn away" their own inner defilements—the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance—and to offer the fragrance of a purified heart to the world.[34]

Light (Dīpa): The Lamp of Wisdom Dispelling Ignorance

Perhaps the most potent symbol among the offerings is that of light, in the form of oil lamps (*dīpa*). Light is the universal metaphor for **wisdom** (*prajñā*), the luminous insight that dispels the profound darkness of **ignorance** (*avidyā*), which Buddhism identifies as the root cause of all suffering.[39] *The Flower Adornment Sūtra* states, "The lamp of wisdom can break through all forms of darkness".[40]

To offer a lamp before the sūtra is therefore a physical prayer to "light the lamp of the mind." It is an act that symbolizes the aspiration to awaken one's own innate Buddha-nature and illuminate the mind with the light of the Dharma.[40] The benefits associated with this offering are directly related to this symbolism. *The Sutra on the Merits of Bestowing Lamps* lists ten rewards for this practice, which include gaining wholesome wisdom, dispelling the great darkness of ignorance, gaining heavenly vision, and, ultimately, the swift realization of *nirvāṇa*.[40] The famous story of "The Poor Woman's Lamp," in which a destitute woman's single, sincere offering of a lamp outshines those of wealthy kings, underscores a crucial principle: it is the depth of one's faith and sincerity, not the material value of the offering, that generates true merit.[41] The offering of light is a profound commitment to becoming a source of wisdom and compassion for the world.

The Bodhisattva's Vow: The Soteriological Context of Merit-Making

The accumulation of "limitless merits" through the devotional practices of Chapter 17 finds its ultimate meaning and purpose within the central ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism: the path of the Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is an enlightenment-being who, motivated by profound and universal compassion (*mahākaruṇā*), makes the heroic vow to postpone their own final entry into the peace of *nirvāṇa* in order to remain in the world of suffering (*saṃsāra*) and guide all other sentient beings to full awakening.[3] This altruistic path is consistently presented in Mahāyāna literature as being superior to the ideal of the *arhat* (the "worthy one" of early Buddhism), whose goal is primarily their own individual liberation from the cycle of rebirth. This earlier goal was sometimes reframed by Mahāyāna proponents as being subtly "selfish" in its focus.[1]

The *Lotus Sūtra* is a powerful exhortation to this Bodhisattva path. It calls upon its followers to

"transform our personal suffering into an aspiration to benefit all beings." The practices detailed in Chapter 17 are the very mechanism for this profound psychological and spiritual transformation. By engaging with the sūtra—which reveals the ultimate truth of the Buddha's eternal presence and the universal potential for Buddhahood inherent in all life—the practitioner's perspective naturally shifts. The preoccupation with one's own finite suffering and liberation gives way to a broader, more compassionate vision focused on the liberation of all.[44] The practices are a way to transcend the "state of attachment and delusion" that keeps one trapped in a self-centered view of existence.

In this context, the "limitless merits" generated through devotion become the Bodhisattva's primary resource, the essential tool for their compassionate activity. As established previously, the Mahāyāna understanding of merit includes the crucial doctrine of transference (*pariṇāmanā*). The goal of these devotional acts is therefore not a form of spiritual self-aggrandizement but the accumulation of a vast treasury of positive karmic energy that can be dedicated to others. This formal act of dedication is the ultimate expression of the Bodhisattva's vow (*praṇidhāna*) and a concrete manifestation of the perfection of generosity (*dāna pāramitā*), the first of the six perfections. The merit becomes the power that enables the Bodhisattva to effectively aid other beings on their path to enlightenment.

Furthermore, the sūtra repeatedly emphasizes the "joy" and "clarity" that arise from engaging in these practices.[8] This is not merely ordinary happiness but can be understood as *muditā*, or empathetic joy, one of the four "divine abodes" (*brahmavihāras*) cultivated by Bodhisattvas.[45] It is the profound joy that arises from seeing oneself and all other beings progressing on the path to awakening, a core affective dimension of the Bodhisattva's compassionate mind. This joy is the antithesis of the suffering born from attachment and delusion; it is the clear, radiant state of a mind dedicated to the welfare of all.

Historical Resonances: The *Lotus Sūtra* in East Asian Buddhism

While the *Lotus Sūtra* appears to have had a relatively marginal impact in its native India, it flourished upon its transmission to East Asia, becoming arguably the single most influential scripture in the development of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism.[1] The fifth-century Chinese translation by the Kuchean monk Kumārajīva, in particular, was a literary and religious masterpiece that secured the sūtra's central place in the East Asian canon. The devotionalism articulated in Chapter 17 was not merely a textual ideal; it was interpreted, amplified, and institutionalized by some of the most powerful schools of thought in the region.

The Tiantai/Tendai Synthesis

The Chinese Tiantai school (known as Tendai in Japan), founded by the great patriarch Zhiyi (538–597), was the first major indigenous school of Chinese Buddhism and took the *Lotus Sūtra* as its central and ultimate scripture.[1] Zhiyi developed a comprehensive and sophisticated doctrinal classification system (*panjiao*) that organized the Buddha's vast and seemingly contradictory teachings into a coherent hierarchy of five periods and eight teachings. In this system, the *Lotus Sūtra* represents the final and highest teaching, the culmination of the Buddha's wisdom.[1]

The core message of the sūtra, for Tiantai, is the doctrine of the "One Vehicle" (*ekayāna*). This doctrine posits that the three distinct paths to liberation taught by the Buddha in earlier scriptures—the path of the *śrāvaka* ("voice-hearer"), the *pratyekabuddha* ("solitary realizer"), and the Bodhisattva—are not ultimate, separate goals. Rather, they are all provisional "skillful means" (*upāya*) designed to lead beings of different capacities toward the one, universal goal of full Buddhahood.[2]

This unifying framework of the One Vehicle allowed the Tiantai/Tendai tradition to synthesize and validate a wide array of Buddhist practices. Devotional acts, such as those prescribed in Chapter 17, were not viewed as inferior or preliminary to the rigorous practice of meditation. Instead, both devotion and meditation were seen as integral and equally valid expressions of the One Vehicle, suitable for different types of practitioners. For Tiantai thinkers, the devotional practices became a tangible way for individuals to engage with the school's profound and complex philosophy, such as the doctrine of "three thousand realms in a single moment of life," which holds that the ultimate reality of Buddhahood is inherent in every moment of ordinary consciousness.[5] Devotion became a direct path to experiencing this immanent truth.

Nichiren's Exclusive Devotion

The devotionalism of the *Lotus Sūtra* found its most radical and focused expression in the teachings of the 13th-century Japanese monk Nichiren (1222–1282). Nichiren's life and teachings were shaped by the prevailing belief that he was living in the "Final Dharma Age" (*mappō*), a degenerate era far removed from the time of the historical Buddha, in which the efficacy of earlier Buddhist teachings had declined and people's capacity to practice them

had diminished.[15]

Based on this eschatological conviction, Nichiren argued that in the age of *mappō*, only the *Lotus Sūtra* retained the power to lead people to enlightenment.[1] He therefore advocated for exclusive devotion to this single scripture, often engaging in harsh criticism (*shakubuku*) of other Buddhist schools, which he believed were misleading people by promoting provisional or ineffective teachings.[15]

For Nichiren, the entirety of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s power, merit, and truth was encapsulated within its title, the *daimoku*. The practice of chanting the phrase *Namu Myōhō-renge-kyō* ("Devotion to the Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Dharma") became the central, and indeed sufficient, practice for attaining Buddhahood in the Final Dharma Age.[1] This single practice was universally accessible to all people, regardless of their education, social status, or monastic ordination.

Nichiren's teaching can be understood as a radical distillation and democratization of the principles of merit-making found in Chapter 17. The complex and often resource-intensive devotional acts described in the sūtra—such as commissioning hand-copied scrolls or making elaborate offerings of rare oils and flowers—were condensed into a single, potent, verbal formula. He taught that the act of chanting the *daimoku* with faith directly transfers all of the eternal Buddha's accumulated merit and wisdom to the practitioner.[15] In this view, the "limitless merits" promised in Chapter 17 are not something to be gradually accumulated through a variety of actions, but are received in their entirety, in an instant, through the single practice of chanting. This represents the ultimate conclusion of the doctrinal shift from "earning" to "receiving" merit that is first indicated in the sūtra itself. The *daimoku* collapses the entire complex of devotionalism into one accessible act, making the boundless power of the *Lotus Sūtra* available to everyone, everywhere, at any time.

A Comparative Perspective on Devotion and Sacred Texts

To fully appreciate the unique character of the devotionalism prescribed in the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is illuminating to place it within the broader landscape of world religions. This involves two lines of inquiry: first, comparing the nature of Buddhist devotion (*saddhā*) with the influential *bhakti* tradition of Hinduism; and second, comparing the specific veneration of the physical sūtra with the reverence shown to sacred texts in other major faith traditions.

Devotion in Dialogue: Buddhist *Saddhā* and Hindu *Bhakti*

The devotional path of *bhakti* in Hinduism is a rich and diverse tradition centered on an emotional, loving devotion to a personal God.[50] It is considered a primary path (*mārga*) to spiritual liberation, emphasizing the relationship between the devotee (*bhakta*) and a chosen deity, such as Krishna, Shiva, or the Divine Mother (Devi).[52] *Bhakti* practices often involve singing devotional hymns (*bhajans* or *kirtans*), chanting the divine names (*japa*), ritual worship (*pūjā*), and meditating on the form and attributes of the deity, all with the goal of cultivating a deep, personal connection and receiving divine grace.[52]

There are notable points of convergence between the devotionalism of the *Lotus Sūtra* and Hindu *bhakti*. Both traditions champion a path of heartfelt emotional engagement, presenting it as a powerful alternative to paths that emphasize purely intellectual knowledge or severe asceticism.[52] Both are fundamentally inclusive, offering a means of spiritual attainment that is accessible to all people, regardless of caste, gender, or social standing, thereby challenging more rigid, hierarchical religious structures.[52] Furthermore, the external forms of worship are often strikingly similar, employing offerings of flowers, incense, light, and food as central expressions of reverence.

However, the points of divergence are theologically crucial and reveal the distinct foundations of each tradition. The primary difference lies in the object and the ultimate goal of devotion. Hindu *bhakti* is fundamentally theistic; it is directed toward a personal, and often supreme, deity who is seen as a creator and sustainer of the universe. The goal is typically union with this divine being, salvation through their grace, or an eternal relationship with them in a heavenly realm.[50] Buddhist devotion (*saddhā*), even in its most fervent Mahāyāna forms, is directed toward the Buddha as the supreme, enlightened teacher and guide, or toward the sūtra as the perfect embodiment of his teaching (*Dharma*). The Buddha is revered as one who discovered and revealed the path to liberation, not as a creator God.[56] Consequently, the ultimate goal is not union with a separate divine being but the awakening of one's own innate, inherent Buddha-nature. The Buddha and the sūtra provide the map and the inspiration, but the journey is one of self-realization. This distinction is rooted in fundamental doctrinal differences: Buddhism's rejection of the Hindu concepts of a creator God (*Īśvara*) and an eternal, unchanging soul (*ātman*).[56]

The Veneration of the Word: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

The devotional acts in Chapter 17 are directed not just toward the sūtra's message but

specifically "to a copy of it." This veneration of the physical text as a sacred object provides a fertile ground for comparative analysis with other "religions of the book." Examining how different traditions relate to their central scriptures reveals a fascinating spectrum of belief and practice, highlighting the unique position of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The veneration of the **Torah** in Judaism is profound. The Torah scroll, containing the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, is considered the direct, revealed word of God given to Moses. It is meticulously handwritten on parchment by a trained scribe, and the physical scroll is treated with the reverence befitting royalty. It is dressed in ornate mantles, adorned with silver crowns and breastplates, and housed in a special cabinet known as the Ark (*Aron Kodesh*). During services, it is paraded through the congregation, who rise in its honor, and it is never touched directly by human hands.[59] The Torah is the physical embodiment of the covenant between God and the Jewish people, and its study and recitation are central to religious life.

In Islam, the **Quran** is held to be the literal, uncreated, and final word of God, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. It is the ultimate source of authority, guidance, and law.[63] The physical text is treated with extreme respect; one must perform ritual purification (*wudu*) before touching it. Its verses are not merely read but are recited melodically (*tajwid*), and the memorization of the entire text (*hifz*) is considered a great act of piety. The Quran is the central miracle of Islam, and its message is meant to be internalized and lived, transforming the believer's entire life in submission to God's will.

Sikhism presents perhaps the most radical reification of a sacred text. The **Guru Granth Sahib** is not merely a holy book; it is explicitly and literally the final, sovereign, and eternal *living Guru*. Following the lineage of ten human Gurus, the tenth, Guru Gobind Singh, declared the scripture itself to be his successor.[67] As such, it is treated with all the protocols of respect due to a living, sovereign person. It is installed on a throne (*takht*) under a canopy, fanned in warm weather, and put to rest in a separate room at night. Sikhs bow before it, and its verses are consulted for daily guidance through a practice called taking a *hukamnama* (divine order).[68] The Guru Granth Sahib is the physical embodiment of the divine Word (*Shabad*) and the living presence of the Guru.

The veneration of the *Lotus Sūtra* occupies a unique position on this spectrum. It is revered with an intensity that goes beyond its content, much like the Torah and the Quran. The act of copying it is itself a path to enlightenment, and offerings are made to the physical object. This is because, in Mahāyāna thought, the sūtra is considered the Dharma Body (*Dharmakāya*) of the Buddha—a tangible manifestation of his enlightened nature.[26] In this sense, it is more than a record of the divine word; it *is* the Buddha in textual form. However, it does not hold the explicit status of a sovereign, living Guru in the way the Guru Granth Sahib does. This comparative analysis illuminates the unique Mahāyāna doctrine of the ultimate, formless reality of the Buddha being accessible and present through a physical, textual form.

Tradition / Text	Conception of Text	Key Devotional Practices	Ultimate Goal of Veneration	Relevant Snippets
Buddhism / *Lotus Sūtra*	Embodiment of the Buddha's highest teaching and Dharma Body (*Dharmakāya*); the "King of Sūtras."	Keeping, reading, reciting, copying (*shakyō*), making offerings of flowers, incense, and light to the physical text. Chanting the title (*daimoku*).	To generate "limitless merit," internalize the Dharma, awaken one's own Buddha-nature, and attain enlightenment for the benefit of all beings.	[1]
Judaism / Torah	The direct, revealed word of God to Moses; the "people of the Book." A physical expression of the covenant.	Handwritten on parchment scrolls, adorned with crowns/mantles, housed in an Ark, processed like royalty, read aloud weekly in the synagogue.	To honor the covenant, connect with God, guide ethical and ritual life according to God's commandments (*mitzvot*).	[59]
Islam / Quran	The literal, uncreated, final word of God revealed to Prophet Muhammad. The highest source of authority and guidance.	Ritual purification before handling, memorization (*hifz*), melodic recitation (*tajwid*), study, and implementation of its laws in	To submit to God's will, receive divine guidance, gain blessings, and achieve success in this life and salvation in the afterlife.	[63]

		daily life.		
Sikhism / Guru Granth Sahib	The final, sovereign, and eternal *living Guru*. The literal embodiment of the ten human Gurus and the divine Word (*Shabad*).	Treated as a living person: installed on a throne (*takht*), put to rest at night, fanned. Bowing before it, listening to its recitation, receiving guidance (*hukamnama*).	To receive spiritual guidance directly from the Guru, connect with the divine, and live according to its teachings of equality, service, and meditation on the One God.	[67]

Conclusion: The Sky of Merit and the Realization of the Buddha Land

The passage from the seventeenth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*—with its promise of merits "as limitless as the sky"—serves as a profound gateway into the heart of Mahāyāna Buddhist devotionalism. This analysis has demonstrated that the prescribed acts of faith, recitation, copying, and making offerings are not a simple checklist for karmic reward. Rather, they constitute a sophisticated and deeply integrated spiritual technology, grounded in the core Mahāyāna doctrines of merit, compassion, and skillful means. The practices function as a direct and accessible path for practitioners to engage with the sūtra's ultimate revelation: the eternal nature of the Buddha and the universal potential for all beings to achieve that same state of awakening.

The "limitless merits" promised are the very "joy and clarity" that the sūtra enables one to gain, a state that is "beyond what we can imagine in our state of attachment and delusion." Merit is not an external commodity to be hoarded but the internal transformation that occurs when one's life is fundamentally reoriented around the truths of the Dharma. The devotional practices are the very means by which one breaks through the delusion of a finite, isolated, and suffering self. By copying the sūtra, one enacts the non-duality of self and Dharma. By offering light, one invokes the wisdom that dispels ignorance. By dedicating the merit gained,

one embodies the compassion of the Bodhisattva.[47]

Ultimately, the function of this profound merit-making is world-transformation. The practitioner of the *Lotus Sūtra* does not engage in these acts to secure passage to a distant paradise after death. Instead, through the purification of their own mind and the selfless dedication of their merit to others, they begin to perceive and actualize this present, ordinary world—the *sahā* world of endurance and suffering—as the immanent Pure Land of the eternal Buddha.[1] The path laid out in Chapter 17 is a call to action, a method for transforming one's own consciousness and, in doing so, revealing the inherent sanctity of the world. The "limitless sky of merit" is not a future reward waiting in the heavens; it is the boundless potential, contained within each moment and each sincere act of devotion, to reveal the radiant, enlightened nature of reality itself.

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