

# The Dhāraṇī as Nonverbal Upāya: Synthesizing Ritual Efficacy and Non-Conceptual Wisdom in the Lotus Sūtra

The *Saddharma Pūṇḍarīka Sūtra* (The Lotus Sutra) stands as a monumental text in Mahayana Buddhism, unique for its powerful assertion of the *Ekayāna* (One Vehicle) and its structural integration of philosophical doctrine with esoteric practice. A nuanced understanding of the *Sūtra* requires analyzing the critical relationship between Chapter 2, "Expedient Means," which outlines the limits of human intellect, and Chapter 26, "Dhāraṇī," which offers cryptic, protective incantations. This report provides an exhaustive exegesis demonstrating that the *dhāraṇīs* are not auxiliary elements but rather function as the ultimate nonverbal and pragmatic expression of the profound, non-conceptual wisdom (*Tathāgata-jñāna-darśana*) that the *Sūtra* declares is fundamentally inaccessible through rational, intellectual understanding alone.

## Part I: The Philosophical Context: The Limitation of Conceptual Wisdom (Chapter 2)

Chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sūtra* establishes the fundamental philosophical problem concerning the nature of ultimate truth. The text performs a strategic theological negation, setting the stage for the necessary intervention of a non-conceptual method.

### The Grand Revelation: The Unfathomable Nature of Buddha-Wisdom

The discourse in Chapter 2 commences dramatically as the World-Honored One, Shakyamuni Buddha, arises serenely from a deep meditative state—specifically, the *saṃādhi* of the origin

of immeasurable meanings.<sup>1</sup> This arising is significant, marking the transition from the private realization of ultimate truth to the public attempt to articulate it to the assembly.

The Buddha immediately declares that the wisdom (*jñāna*) of the Buddhas is "infinitely profound and immeasurable".<sup>1</sup> This wisdom is described as "extremely deep; it's bottomless" and "unlimited because it cannot be reckoned".<sup>2</sup> It is a knowledge so vast, deep, and far-reaching that it cannot be fathomed or known by calculation or analogy.<sup>2</sup> The essence of this declaration is that the ultimate reality, the true aspect of all phenomena, transcends any category, measure, or description that conventional human language and rational thought can provide.<sup>1</sup>

This assertion of transcendent wisdom serves a crucial purpose: it is not merely an expression of praise but a deliberate theological act of invalidation. By asserting the limitless scope of *Tathāgata-jñāna-darśana*, Shakyamuni immediately demonstrates that any framework used by those relying solely on conceptual knowledge—particularly the provisional teachings—is inherently deficient for attaining full Buddhahood. This profound depth establishes an insurmountable barrier for conceptual minds, confirming that the methodology required for accessing this wisdom must lie outside the domain of discursive understanding.

## **The Barrier of Intellect: Exclusion of the Small Vehicles**

The *Sūtra* explicitly details the incapacity of the sages of the Small Vehicle to grasp the Buddha's ultimate wisdom. The text states unequivocally that the gateway to this wisdom is "difficult to understand and difficult to enter" and "cannot be known by any of the Hearers (Śrāvakas) or Pratyekabuddhas".<sup>2</sup> These practitioners, having cultivated the provisional *dharmas* and certified to certain fruitions of sagehood, represent the epitome of intellectual attachment to a limited form of liberation.

They are metaphorically "satisfied with little"<sup>2</sup>, having stopped short at the "Transformed City" in the parable, believing their attainment of limited Nirvana to be the ultimate goal.<sup>2</sup> Their focus on immediate escape from suffering, while effective as a preliminary step, resulted in an attachment to the form of the teaching rather than the boundless reality it pointed toward. The Buddha explains that his wisdom is founded upon drawing near to countless Buddhas and "exhaustively practicing the unlimited Dharmas of the Way" over immense periods of time.<sup>2</sup> This boundless, limitless cultivation underscores that a narrow, intellectual path confined to the practices of the Small Vehicle is fundamentally insufficient for realizing the vastness of the Buddha Vehicle.<sup>2</sup>

The text implies that access to this ultimate wisdom demands a shift from analytical

knowledge to non-conceptual perception. While the wisdom has intellectual facets, these are only one component of "something far greater and boundless than even the greatest of human minds".<sup>6</sup> Access is suggested only for those Bodhisattvas who, in their practice, demonstrate profound *belief* and a "willingness to understand," indicating that the prerequisite for entry is an intuitive, faith-based openness to innate Buddha-potential rather than reliance on finite analytical thought.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Doctrine of Skillful Means (*Upāya*): Opening the Provisional**

Since ultimate reality is inexpressible, the Buddhas employ *upāya*, or expedient devices, which are effective, provisional methods.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of *upāya* is twofold: initially, to "bestow the provisional for the sake of the real" by teaching the Small Vehicle (Hearer and Pratyekabuddha Vehicles) as a necessary temporary device<sup>2</sup>, and subsequently, to lead sentient beings to "separate from all attachments".<sup>2</sup>

The pivotal doctrine articulated in Chapter 2 is "opening the provisional to reveal the real." The Buddha declares that the Small Vehicle doctrines were not the utmost path and that their fruition was "not the ultimate position".<sup>2</sup> By making these provisional paths obsolete, the Buddha "revealed the genuine doctrine" of the ultimate Buddha Vehicle, exhorting practitioners to "return from the small and go towards the great".<sup>2</sup>

The reality revealed is the *true aspect of all phenomena*, articulated through the Ten Factors of Life.<sup>1</sup> This realization demands a holistic, non-dualistic insight that transcends the fragmentation inherent in conceptual attachment. The profound consequence of Chapter 2 is the creation of a logical necessity: if the ultimate truth is non-conceptual, yet the Buddha must transmit it, the supreme *upāya* must be one that uses language or sound in a way that utterly bypasses semantic interpretation. It must be a transmission that is purely efficacious without requiring conceptual mediation. This requirement sets the specific functional parameters for the *dhāraṇī*.

## **Part II: The Ritual Mechanism: *Dhāraṇī* as Protective Incantation (Chapter 26)**

Chapter 26 introduces the protective incantations (*dhāraṇī-spells*), offering the pragmatic mechanism required to bridge the gap between the inexpressible truth and the struggling

practitioner. The efficacy of this practice is centered entirely on its ritual function and sonic power, independent of linguistic meaning.

## **Medicine-King Bodhisattva's Vow and the Protection of the Dharma**

The ritual discourse begins with Medicine-King Bodhisattva (*Bhaiṣajyarāja*), a figure known for his extensive and arduous practices over countless *kalpas*.<sup>7</sup> He rises to address the Buddha, offering *dhāraṇī*-spells to protect those who "accept and uphold the Lotus Sutra, if they read and recite it, penetrate its meaning, or copy the sutra scrolls".<sup>9</sup> This protection is an active form of compassionate *upāya* offered by an advanced enlightened being.

The protective scope is vast, ensuring that the Dharma Expounder is shielded from physical danger, sickness, and malicious spiritual entities such as hungry ghosts.<sup>10</sup> The *dhāraṇī* protects the practitioner so that "all affairs turn out lucky".<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the incantations reflect the Mahayana ideal that spiritual practice is a collective endeavor; the protection is for all who practice the *Sūtra*, reflecting the boundless compassion of the Bodhisattva ideal.<sup>12</sup> The power invoked is cosmic, derived from Buddhas "as numerous as 6.2 billion Ganges' sands".<sup>12</sup> Consequently, any assault upon a teacher of the Law is equated with harming these countless Buddhas themselves.<sup>12</sup> This guarantee of security creates the necessary environment—free from physical or spiritual obstruction—for the practitioner to proceed toward ultimate realization.

## **Etymology and Function of *Dhāraṇī*: Uniting the Three Karmas**

The Sanskrit term *dhāraṇī* is defined by its function: "uniting and upholding".<sup>10</sup> Though categorized with mantras and viewed as incantations or recitations<sup>11</sup>, the textual commentary emphasizes the profound internal effects of the practice. A *dhāraṇī* "unites all dharmas and upholds limitless meanings".<sup>10</sup>

The core function is the purification and unification of the three karmas: body, mouth (speech), and mind.<sup>10</sup> By actively reciting the *dhāraṇī*, the practitioner upholds ethical conduct, preventing the physical acts of killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct; restraining the mental indulgence in greed, hatred, and stupidity; and purifying verbal acts like lying, harsh speech, and duplicity.<sup>10</sup> This systematic purification of the vehicles of experience is essential for spiritual advancement. The text explicitly links this disciplined recitation to meditative attainment: a *dhāraṇī* "unites the mind so it can obtain the Dharma Flower

Samadhi".<sup>10</sup> The efficacy of the *dhāraṇī* is thus rooted in *action* and *ritual function*, serving as a powerful tool for spiritual development and for inducing the deep contemplative state necessary for receiving the ultimate teaching.<sup>12</sup>

## The Linguistic Paradox: Efficacy Without Comprehension

The most striking feature of the *dhāraṇīs* in Chapter 26 is their linguistic inscrutability; they are presented in a language that is no longer understood, and some practitioners note that the sounds "do not make any sense even in Sanskrit".<sup>14</sup> This incomprehensible nature is not a deficiency but the ultimate expression of its function as a nonverbal teaching, confirming the premise established in Chapter 2.

Scholarly analyses of *dhāraṇī* literature affirm that their study must prioritize "pragmatics"—the analysis of meaning through context and speech acts—over "truth-conditional semantics," which seeks conventional denotative meaning.<sup>15</sup> The power resides in the sonic event, the disciplined act of recitation, and the underlying vow-power it invokes, rather than the translation of individual words.<sup>15</sup>

The *dhāraṇī* serves as the perfect anti-conceptual *upāya*. If the incantations possessed clear, translatable meaning, the practitioner would inevitably fall back into the intellectual grasping and attachment that Chapter 2 identifies as the primary obstruction to Buddha-wisdom. By focusing the mind purely on sound and intention, the recitation provides a direct, non-analytical link to the truth. The *dhāraṇī* uses the medium of speech to transcend the limitations of semantic speech, fulfilling the requirement for a transmission that bypasses the intellectual barrier and ensures the realization of the nonverbal aspect of the Buddha Dharma.

## Part III: The Synthesis: *Dhāraṇī* as Nonverbal Expression of Buddha-Wisdom

The relationship between Chapter 2 and Chapter 26 is one of problem and solution: the philosophical declaration of inexpressible wisdom is resolved through the practical ritual of the *dhāraṇī*. The incantation provides the essential, non-conceptual tool for realizing the *Ekayāna*.

## Bridging the Two Vehicles: The *Dhāraṇī* as the Ultimate Non-Conceptual Tool

The *dhāraṇī* practice actualizes the theoretical affirmation of the One Vehicle by offering a means to access the wisdom that is "boundless and limitless" and "difficult to enter" through intellectual means.<sup>2</sup> Since conventional knowledge and conceptual attachment prevent entry to the ultimate truth<sup>4</sup>, the sonic discipline of the *dhāraṇī* forces the mind away from conceptual fragmentation.

This ritual practice facilitates the development of non-conceptual wisdom (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*), characterized by "intuitive wisdom" and "direct awareness" that perceives reality without the constraints of conventional thought.<sup>17</sup> The disciplined, focused sound acts as a method, akin to yogic meditative practices, that allows the practitioner to develop an awareness of the innate enlightenment (*tathāgatagarbha*) always implicit in consciousness.<sup>18</sup> The reliance on recitation demonstrates that the path to ultimate wisdom is one of committed practice and *belief*<sup>6</sup>, rather than intellectual mastery.

## Sound Over Sense: The Mechanism of Pragmatic Realization

In the highest interpretive framework of the *Sūtra*, particularly the Tiantai tradition, the revelation of the true aspect of all phenomena leads to the realization that "words and letters are precisely liberation".<sup>19</sup> The *dhāraṇī*, as an utterance devoid of conventional conceptual freight, serves as a powerful demonstration of this principle: the sound is efficacious by its intrinsic nature and purity, not by its semantic definition. The physical act of recitation, therefore, is not a preliminary exercise but the very realization of the ultimate non-dual truth.

The *dhāraṇī* represents the embodiment of the unspoken teaching mentioned in the user premise. It is a profound message transmitted through acoustic energy and rigorous spiritual discipline, guiding the practitioner beyond the need for spoken or written meaning. The critical function of protection—guarding against evil entities<sup>10</sup> and purifying the three karmas<sup>10</sup>—ensures that the spiritual vessel (the practitioner) is pure, stable, and prepared to contain the vastness of the ultimate, non-conceptual Dharma that Chapter 2 describes.

The deployment of the *dhāraṇī* successfully resolves the paradox of the *Lotus Sūtra*: how to teach that which is fundamentally inexpressible. By being pronounced by a Bodhisattva (*Bhaiṣajyarāja*) and focused on the purification of *karma* via the mouth<sup>10</sup>, the *dhāraṇī* transforms the medium of speech into a vehicle of non-conceptual truth. The physical act of

speaking becomes the ultimate negation of attachment to speech.

The following table summarizes the structural relationship between the philosophical statement of the impediment and the ritual solution offered:

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Conceptual Limitation and Ritual Transcendence in the Lotus Sutra

<b>Sūtra Element</b>	<b>Chapter 2: Conceptual Impediment</b>	<b>Chapter 26: Ritual Transcendent</b>	<b>Function in the <i>Ekayāna</i></b>
<b>Spiritual State</b>	Small Vehicle (Śrāvaka/Pratyekabuddha) Satisfaction with Nirvana (Provisional) <sup>2</sup>	Bodhisattva/Dharma Exponent (Upholding the Real) <sup>9</sup>	Shift from individual liberation ( <i>Hīnayāna</i> ) to universal enlightenment ( <i>Mahāyāna</i> )
<b>Mode of Access</b>	Intellectual Comprehension ( <i>Jñāna</i> ) and Conceptual Attachment <sup>4</sup>	Acoustic/Ritual Efficacy ( <i>Dhāraṇī</i> ) and Non-Conceptual Unification <sup>12</sup>	Bypassing intellectual obstruction via sound and pure practice.
<b>Linguistic Status</b>	Semantic Clarity ( <i>Dharma-doors</i> / Skillful Speech) <sup>5</sup>	Linguistic Crypticism (Incomprehensible Incantation) <sup>14</sup>	Reminding the practitioner that wisdom transcends written or spoken meaning. <sup>19</sup>
<b>Primary Goal</b>	Attainment of Arhatship (Ending Suffering)	Protection of the Dharma and Attainment of <i>Samādhi</i> (Uniting Mind/Body) <sup>10</sup>	Securing the conditions necessary to fully realize the ultimate truth (Buddhahood).

## Part IV: Tradition and Practice: Interpretative

# Frameworks

The profound relationship between non-conceptual wisdom and ritual sound established in the *Lotus Sūtra* shaped the major East Asian traditions that adopted the text as their core teaching.

## The Tiantai Perspective: Harmonization and Totality

The Tiantai school, which along with its derivative, Japanese Tendai, holds the *Lotus Sūtra* as the "King of all Sutras" and the final, complete teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha<sup>20</sup>, embraced a perspective of profound inclusion. Tiantai philosophically validates the *Ekayāna* by reconciling disparate Buddhist thoughts, asserting that all paths lead to Buddhahood.<sup>22</sup>

The tradition is eclectic and inclusive, accepting various methods of practice, including meditation, chanting, and esoteric rituals.<sup>23</sup> The *dhāraṇī* practice of Chapter 26 is seamlessly integrated as a vital component supporting the realization of the ultimate non-conceptual truth. The ritual ensures physical and mental purity, which directly facilitates the attainment of calming and contemplation (*shikan*).<sup>19</sup> By stabilizing the mind and purifying the *karmas*<sup>10</sup>, the *dhāraṇī* prepares the practitioner to grasp the totality of the universe in a single moment of life (*Ichinen Sanzen*), a principle derived directly from the revelation of the Ten Factors in Chapter 2.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for Tiantai, the *dhāraṇī* is a necessary, practical method for realizing the comprehensive philosophical vision of the *Sūtra*.

## The Nichiren Tradition: Condensation into the *Daimoku*

Nichiren Buddhism, while emerging from the Tendai lineage, adopted a radically exclusive stance, asserting that only the core teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* is valid for the current age, rejecting all other sutras and practices as inferior.<sup>23</sup> This exclusivity led to a distillation of the *Sūtra*'s immense ritual and protective power into a single, focused practice.

The philosophical and protective essence of the entire *Lotus Sūtra*, including the specific protective *dhāraṇīs* of Chapter 26, is condensed into the repeated invocation of the sacred title, the *Daimoku*: *Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō*.<sup>23</sup> In this tradition, the *Daimoku* functions precisely as the quintessential *dhāraṇī*—a non-conceptual, sonic mantra. It embodies the whole of the

Buddha's limitless wisdom (Ch. 2) and protective vow power (Ch. 26).

This intense focus on pure acoustic practice asserts the maximum efficacy of the ritual. The *Daimoku* is believed to instantly connect the practitioner to the Buddha-nature, allowing for the immediate attainment of Buddhahood by transforming "poison into medicine".<sup>25</sup> The *Daimoku*, sharing the protective and unifying function of the traditional *dhāraṇī*<sup>10</sup>, thus becomes the ultimate single, nonverbal *upāya* necessary for immediate realization. This development highlights the successful consolidation of the *dhāraṇī* principle, confirming that the complete non-conceptual truth can be entirely transmitted and realized through pure, non-semantic sound.

Table 2: The Two Poles of Transcendence in the Lotus Sutra

Mode of Transcendence	Chapter 2 (Philosophical)	Chapter 26 (Ritual/Practical)	East Asian Interpretive Outcome
<b>Form of Wisdom</b>	Non-conceptual Wisdom ( <i>Nirvikalpa-jñāna</i> ) <sup>17</sup>	Incantatory Wisdom ( <i>Dhāraṇī</i> efficacy) <sup>13</sup>	Unification: The True Aspect of All Phenomena <sup>1</sup>
<b>Barrier Overcome</b>	Attachment to Conceptual Form/Provisional Teaching <sup>2</sup>	Attack by Malicious Forces/Internal Distraction <sup>10</sup>	Protection and cultivation of stable <i>samādhi</i> <sup>10</sup>
<b>Method of Practice</b>	Contemplation/Realization of the True Aspect <sup>1</sup>	Pure Recitation (Acoustic Pragmatics) <sup>15</sup>	The <i>Daimoku</i> as the ultimate, non-conceptual, unifying ritual <sup>23</sup>
<b>Ultimate Source</b>	The Buddha's Profound, Unlimited Wisdom <sup>3</sup>	Bodhisattva/Deva Vow Power (Medicine-King) <sup>9</sup>	The <i>Ekayāna</i> path, universally available through practice/faith <sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion: The Unspoken Dharma Revealed Through Sound

The *Lotus Sūtra* utilizes the *dhāraṇī* in Chapter 26 to provide the functional and ritual resolution to the epistemological crisis declared in Chapter 2. By defining Buddha-wisdom as profoundly inexpressible and inaccessible through conventional conceptual means, the *Sūtra* necessitates a nonverbal technology for transmission.

The *dhāraṇī*, as an inscrutable yet efficacious sonic incantation, fulfills this mandate. It is not merely a set of magical spells but a mechanism for purification that bypasses discursive thought, uniting the three karmas of body, mouth, and mind.<sup>10</sup> The efficacy of the sound provides a direct channel for spiritual retention, forcing the mind toward non-conceptual concentration (*saṃādhi*).<sup>10</sup>

The *dhāraṇī* is ultimately the perfect *upāya* because it demands faith and adherence to practice over semantic analysis. It is a powerful reminder that the path to enlightenment requires looking beyond the limitations of the spoken or written word to the unspoken teaching inherent in the discipline and dedication to the Buddha Dharma. By ensuring the physical and spiritual protection of the expounders and upholders of the *Sūtra*, the *dhāraṇī* secures the conditions necessary for all practitioners to realize the vast, limitless wisdom of the Buddhas and successfully enter the ultimate *Ekayāna* path.

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