

The Body as a Lamp: An Analysis of Self-Sacrifice and the Bodhisattva Ideal in Chapter 23 of the Lotus Sūtra

Introduction: The Inquiry in the World of Endurance

Chapter Twenty-Three of the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* (The Lotus Sutra), titled "The Former Deeds of Bodhisattva Medicine King," stands as one of the most dramatic and doctrinally profound sections of this seminal Mahayana text. It presents a narrative of extreme asceticism and self-sacrifice that, on its surface, appears both astonishing and potentially inaccessible. However, a deeper analysis reveals that the chapter is a masterfully constructed allegory, employing a narrative of ultimate physical devotion to convey core Mahayana principles regarding the nature of the body, the motivation of compassion, the supreme value of the Dharma, and the universal potential for enlightenment. The chapter's profound teachings are unlocked through a seemingly simple inquiry, a pedagogical device that sets the stage for the Buddha's discourse.

The Interlocutor's Role: Star-King-Flower Bodhisattva's Question

The chapter commences not with a sermon, but with a question posed by the Bodhisattva Constellation King Flower (Skt. *Nakṣatrarājasamkusumitābhijñā*) to Śākyamuni Buddha. He asks, "World-Honored One! Why does Medicine-King Bodhisattva walk about this Sahā-World? World-Honored One! This Medicine-King Bodhisattva will have to practice hundreds of thousands of billions of nayutas of austerities in this world".¹ This question is far from a simple request for information; it is a sophisticated framing of a central paradox within the Mahayana worldview. It acknowledges the immense suffering and difficulty inherent in this realm and implicitly contrasts it with the peace and pleasure of the celestial Pure Lands to which an advanced being like Medicine-King Bodhisattva is entitled. The question voices the apprehension of the assembly and the reader: why would a being of such attainment choose

to remain in a world of conflict and endure such bitter practices?.²

The questioner himself, Bodhisattva Constellation King Flower, is a figure of significant stature. His name evokes both the vastness of the cosmos ("Constellation King," a term sometimes referring to the moon as the king of stars) and the purity of enlightenment ("Flower," a symbol for the lotus).⁶ As a "Dharma Prince Bodhisattva," he acts as a worthy interlocutor, capable of comprehending the profound and challenging answer that the Buddha is about to provide.¹ His inquiry, therefore, should not be seen as an expression of personal ignorance. Rather, it functions as a form of skillful means (*upāya*). As an advanced Bodhisattva, he understands the principles of compassion that motivate such a choice. His act of asking is a pedagogical performance for the benefit of the entire assembly. It creates the necessary narrative space for the Buddha to deliver a teaching on devotion and non-attachment that might otherwise be too extreme or difficult to grasp. This dynamic, where a well-posed question from an advanced disciple unlocks deeper layers of the Dharma, is a common and effective literary device in Mahayana sutras, modeling the ideal relationship between teacher and student.⁷

The Crucible of Practice: Defining the Sahā-World

The setting for this profound drama is explicitly identified as the **Sahā-World** (Skt. *sahāloka* or *sahāloka dhātu*). The name itself is doctrinally significant, deriving from a Sanskrit root meaning "to bear" or "to endure".⁹ It is often translated as the "world of endurance," signifying a realm where inhabitants must endure immense suffering.¹⁰ This is the mundane world, the entirety of conditioned existence outside of *nirvāṇa*, where beings are trapped in the relentless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (*saṃsāra*).⁹ It is a world defiled by the "three poisons" of greed, hatred, and delusion, marked by constant conflict and moral challenges.¹⁰

Yet, the Mahayana tradition, particularly within the *Lotus Sūtra* and texts like the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, presents a radical reinterpretation of this realm. While it is undeniably a place of suffering, it is also the chosen arena where a Buddha appears to teach the Dharma.⁹ The *Lotus Sūtra* goes further, positing that from the enlightened perspective of a Buddha, this very world of distress is in itself a Pure Land, the Land of Eternally Tranquil Light.¹⁰ This establishes the central tension of the Bodhisattva's mission: the Sahā-World is simultaneously a realm of profound conflict and the essential, irreplaceable arena for the practice of compassion.

The emphasis on the "bitter practices" and "difficult to practice" austerities required in the Sahā-World is not incidental.⁴ It establishes a direct correlation between the difficulty of the environment and the value of a Bodhisattva's spiritual cultivation. The narrative of Medicine-King's past life begins in a celestial Pure Land, a world where the ground is level

"because the people's hearts were level," where beings are born spontaneously from lotus flowers, and where there are no lower realms or difficulties.⁴ Such a realm, while blissful, offers no resistance, no challenge against which the virtues of patience, vigor, and compassion can be perfected. The Sahā-World, in stark contrast, is the necessary forge where the steel of a Bodhisattva's resolve is tempered. It is the chosen field of practice precisely *because* of its imperfections. The suffering it contains is the very reason for the Bodhisattva's presence and the raw material for their work of universal salvation.

The Former Deeds of Bodhisattva All Beings Delight in Seeing

In response to the inquiry of Bodhisattva Constellation King Flower, Śākyamuni Buddha delves into the distant past, recounting a narrative that serves as the foundation for understanding Medicine-King Bodhisattva's profound connection to the Sahā-World. This story traces the journey of a single being across lifetimes, illustrating the transformative power of the Dharma and the extraordinary lengths to which a Bodhisattva will go out of devotion and gratitude.

A Past Aeon: The Buddha Sun-Moon-Pure-Bright-Virtue

The Buddha begins his tale in a past so remote it defies conventional measurement, "as many eons ago as there are grains of sand in limitless Ganges Rivers".¹ In this ancient time, there lived a Buddha named **Virtue Pure and Bright Like the Sun and Moon** (Skt. *Candrasūryavimalaprabhāśrī*).⁵ The world in which this Buddha taught was a perfected realm, a Pure Land meticulously described to contrast with the flawed Sahā-World. It was a land of immense beauty and purity, adorned with jeweled trees, terraces made of the seven treasures, and celestial music that praised the Buddha.³

This world was fundamentally different in its constitution. It was free from the three lower realms of existence—the hells, the realm of hungry ghosts, and the animal realm—and was also devoid of *asuras*, the contentious demigods.³ There were no women; all beings were born by spontaneous transformation, appearing fully formed on lotus flowers with pure bodies.⁴ The very ground was as level as the palm of a hand, made of precious *vaiḍūrya* (lapis lazuli). This physical topography was not arbitrary but a direct reflection of the inner state of its inhabitants. As the commentary explains, "Why was the ground level? Because the people's hearts were level. When people's hearts are not level, there are mountains, valleys, ravines,

and seas... It is people's minds that create these things".⁴ This idyllic setting provides the backdrop for the early life of the Bodhisattva who would become Medicine-King, highlighting the purity of his origins before he chose the path of extreme austerity.

The Diligent Practitioner: Bodhisattva All Beings Delight in Seeing

Among the eighty *koṭis* (tens of millions) of great Bodhisattvas who followed this ancient Buddha was one named **All Beings Delight in Seeing** (Skt. *Sarvasattvapriyadarśana*).⁴ This name was not merely a title but a description of his effect on the world. Due to the deep and positive karmic affinities he had cultivated with all living beings over countless lifetimes, his very presence brought happiness to all who beheld him.⁴ Whether they were believers or non-believers, human or animal, seeing him filled their hearts with joy.⁴

Despite living in a Pure Land and possessing such a beloved nature, this Bodhisattva was not content with passive existence. He was defined by his profound dedication to spiritual practice, specifically his enjoyment of "ascetic practices" (*duṣkara-caryā*).² Within the Dharma of the Buddha Virtue Pure and Bright Like the Sun and Moon, he applied himself with extraordinary vigor (*vīrya*), "single-mindedly seeking Buddhahood for a full twelve thousand years".² This immense span of time dedicated to arduous cultivation serves to emphasize the scale of commitment and perseverance required to traverse the Bodhisattva path. It stands as a powerful lesson for practitioners, illustrating that enlightenment is not the result of a brief or casual effort but of sustained, focused diligence over cosmic timescales.⁴

The Power of the Dharma: Attaining the Samādhi of All Forms

The pivotal moment in the Bodhisattva's long career of practice came when he had the opportunity to hear the Buddha Virtue Pure and Bright Like the Sun and Moon preach the *Lotus Sūtra*.² The encounter with this supreme teaching acted as a catalyst, elevating his spiritual capacities to a new level. As a direct consequence of hearing and embracing the Dharma of the *Lotus Sūtra*, he attained a profound state of meditative concentration known as the "**samādhi of the manifestation of all physical forms**" (*sarvarūpasamdarśana-samādhi*).²

This was not merely a state of inner peace but a dynamic and compassionate power. This samādhi granted him the supernatural ability to manifest in any form required to teach and liberate sentient beings according to their specific needs and capacities.¹⁸ As the

commentaries explain, he could appear as a person to save a person, as a dog to teach a dog, or even manifest as an evil person to skillfully guide another evildoer away from their harmful path and toward the good.⁴ This ability to adapt his form perfectly to the audience is a classic expression of a Bodhisattva's skillful means. Overcome with joy, the Bodhisattva immediately recognized the source of this incredible power: "This is through the power of having heard the *Dharma Flower Sutra*".⁴ This realization filled him with an overwhelming sense of gratitude and the resolve to make a supreme offering in return.

The First Great Offering: The Auto-Cremation of the Body

Driven by this profound gratitude, Bodhisattva All Beings Delight in Seeing first made extensive conventional offerings of rare flowers and celestial incense.¹ Yet, in his heart, he felt that no external offering could adequately express the depth of his reverence for the Buddha and the teaching that had granted him such a profound realization. He thought to himself, "Although by means of spiritual powers I have made this offering to the Buddha, it is not as good as offering my body".²

He then embarked on a methodical and astonishing preparation for this ultimate sacrifice. For a period of 1,200 years, he ingested a variety of fragrant substances—sandalwood, aloeswood, and various resins—and drank the fragrant oils of champaka and other flowers.² This act of internal purification transformed his very being into a vessel of incense. Finally, anointing his body, wrapping himself in heavenly jeweled robes, and pouring more fragrant oil over his head, he stood before the Buddha Virtue Pure and Bright Like the Sun and Moon and, using his spiritual powers, set his own body ablaze.¹

The light from his burning body was not a localized flame but a cosmic event, illuminating worlds as numerous as the sands in eighty million Ganges Rivers.¹ From across the universe, the Buddhas of these myriad worlds spoke with one voice, praising his act: "Excellent, excellent, good man! This is true diligence. This is what is called a **true Dharma offering** to the Thus Come One".¹ They declared that this offering of the body was the "**foremost giving**," a sacrifice whose merit surpassed any possible material offering, including the giving away of entire worlds, cities, spouses, and children.² For 1,200 years, his body burned, a constant, radiant offering to the Dharma.²

Rebirth and the Second Offering: The Burning of the Arms

When his life as a living pyre came to an end, the karmic power of his offering resulted in an immediate and auspicious rebirth. He was born again by transformation in the same world, appearing seated in full lotus in the household of King Pure Virtue.² Some time later, the Buddha Virtue Pure and Bright Like the Sun and Moon announced his impending entry into *parinirvāṇa* and entrusted the Dharma to the Bodhisattva.¹ Deeply grieved by the Buddha's passing, the Bodhisattva cremated the Buddha's body on a pyre of precious sandalwood, collected the sacred relics (*śarīra*), and built 84,000 stupas to enshrine them, making vast offerings.²

Even after these extensive acts of devotion, his heart was not yet satisfied.³ He felt a further offering was required to fully honor the relics of the Buddha. In the midst of the great assembly of gods and humans, he made a second, almost unimaginable sacrifice: he set fire to both of his arms, offering them to the stupas. This act of devotion continued for an astounding 72,000 years.²⁰ His followers, seeing their teacher maimed and deformed, were overcome with sorrow.² At that moment, the Bodhisattva made a great vow before the assembly, a "statement of truth" (*satyakriyā*): "Having renounced both of my arms, I should certainly attain the Buddha's golden-colored body. If this is true and not false, both of my arms should now be restored to as they were before".²

Because of the immense power of his accumulated merit, wisdom, and the purity of his vow, his arms were miraculously and spontaneously regenerated, perfectly restored.² At this, the entire world system quaked, and the heavens rained down jeweled flowers. Having concluded this epic history, Śākyamuni Buddha reveals its direct relevance to the present assembly, stating to Bodhisattva Constellation King Flower: "Was the Bodhisattva All Beings Delight in Seeing anyone else? He was just the present Medicine King Bodhisattva".²

The Allegory of the Body: Deconstructing the "True Dharma Offering"

The narrative of Medicine-King Bodhisattva's self-immolation is designed to evoke awe and challenge the listener's understanding of devotion, value, and the nature of the self. To interpret this story as a literal prescription for self-harm would be to miss its profound allegorical purpose. The act of offering the body is a powerful, multivalent symbol that serves to illustrate several core Buddhist doctrines, including non-attachment to the physical form, the perfection of generosity, and the supreme value of embodying the Dharma itself.

The Body as a "False Combination": Transcending Physicality

The key to understanding the Bodhisattva's ability to perform such an act lies in his enlightened perspective on the nature of the body. The commentaries accompanying the *Sūtra* repeatedly emphasize that he was able to endure the burning without what an ordinary being would perceive as pain because he had fully realized the body's empty and composite nature.⁵ He knew with unwavering certainty that the physical form is nothing more than a "false combination of the four elements—earth, air, fire, and water".⁴ This is a direct and dramatic illustration of the foundational Buddhist doctrine of no-self, or *anātman*.

For the Bodhisattva, the body was not a solid, permanent entity housing a real "self." It was an impermanent, conditioned phenomenon, empty of any inherent, abiding essence. Having penetrated this truth, he had "forgotten all about his own body" and was utterly free from attachment to it.⁵ This state of non-attachment is not one of nihilistic disregard but of profound liberation. It is the freedom from the fear and possessiveness that bind ordinary beings to their physical forms. The act of self-immolation, therefore, is not an act of suicide or self-destruction in the conventional sense. It is the ultimate demonstration of having fully internalized the wisdom of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). He is not destroying a "self"; he is offering up a temporary collection of elements, a vehicle he no longer clings to, for a purpose he deems infinitely more valuable.

The Perfection of Generosity (*Dāna Pāramitā*)

The Bodhisattva path in Mahayana Buddhism is often structured around the cultivation of the Six or Ten Perfections (*pāramitās*), and the first and most fundamental of these is the Perfection of Generosity (*dāna pāramitā*). The offering of the body by Medicine-King is presented as the absolute zenith of this practice. The assembled Buddhas from across the cosmos explicitly praise his sacrifice as the "foremost giving" (*agradāna*), declaring it superior to the giving of all "outer wealth," which includes not only material possessions but even one's kingdom, city, spouse, and children.³

This theme of relinquishing the body is a powerful and recurring motif throughout Buddhist hagiography, finding its most extensive expression in the *Jātaka* tales, which recount the former lives of Śākyamuni Buddha as a Bodhisattva.²⁰ In these stories, the Buddha-to-be is shown repeatedly offering his flesh to feed hungry beings, his eyes to a blind person, and his very life to save others or to hear a single verse of Dharma.²⁴ These acts represent the complete and utter eradication of selfishness, the final letting go of the instinct for self-preservation in favor of a total commitment to the welfare of all other beings.²⁷

Medicine-King's story fits squarely within this tradition, presenting the offering of the body as the ultimate expression of selfless giving and the perfection of the virtue of *dāna*.

The "True Dharma Offering" (*Dharma-pūjā*)

Perhaps the most crucial interpretive key provided by the text itself is the Buddhas' designation of the act as a **"true Dharma offering"** (*dharma-pūjā*).³ This term creates a critical distinction between two types of offerings. The first is a material offering (*āmiṣa-pūjā*), which involves external objects like flowers, incense, or food. While meritorious, such offerings are ultimately separate from the practitioner. A Dharma offering, by contrast, is one that involves the direct practice, embodiment, and realization of the Buddha's teachings.

By burning his body out of profound gratitude for hearing the *Lotus Sūtra*, Bodhisattva All Beings Delight in Seeing transforms his entire physical existence into a manifestation of the Dharma. His burning form ceases to be mere flesh and becomes a "lamp," spreading the "Light of the Dharma" across millions of worlds.¹⁸ The true substance of the offering is not the carbon and water of his body, but the qualities it represents: the unwavering resolve, the incredible vigor, the profound wisdom, and the boundless gratitude that the act embodies. It is an offering made *of* the Dharma (his realization of no-self), *through* the Dharma (his spiritual powers gained from the *Sūtra*), and *for* the Dharma (in reverence to the teaching). This elevates the act from a physical sacrifice to a profound spiritual statement. The story functions as an extreme symbol, setting an impossibly high standard for physical devotion in order to make the subsequent pivot—the declaration that upholding the *Sūtra* is even more meritorious—all the more impactful. This rhetorical structure suggests that the true "burning" for a practitioner is not of the physical body, but the complete consumption of the ego and all worldly attachments in the fire of diligent practice and faith.

The Symbolism of Fire

Fire is a deeply resonant and ambivalent symbol within Buddhist thought. It is most commonly used to represent the causes of suffering. The Buddha's famous *Fire Sermon* describes the world as being ablaze with the "fires" of greed, hatred, and delusion.³¹ At the same time, fire is also a symbol of purification and transformation—the element that consumes impurities and refines base materials into something precious.³¹

In the context of Medicine-King's offering, fire is powerfully reclaimed and repurposed. The Bodhisattva takes the very element that symbolizes suffering and the destructive nature of

worldly attachment and transforms it into a vehicle for the ultimate expression of devotion and enlightenment. This is not a passive submission to the fire of *saṃsāra*; it is an active and masterful utilization of it. He demonstrates complete spiritual mastery over the phenomenal world by turning the fire of suffering into the light of wisdom. The act is therefore not one of destruction but of construction, as the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh would later describe modern acts of self-immolation: "to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people. This is not suicide".³⁴ Medicine-King's offering constructs immeasurable merit and serves as a teaching that illuminates the power of the Dharma to transform any and all conditions, even the most destructive, into a cause for liberation. This act, when properly understood through the lens of wisdom and gratitude for the Dharma, becomes a powerful karmic catalyst. The narrative follows a clear progression: hearing the *Sūtra* leads to the attainment of *śamādhi*, which inspires the offering. This offering, in turn, leads to a noble rebirth and the eventual attainment of Buddhahood.²² The radical sacrifice is not an end in itself but a potent spiritual practice that purifies past negative karma and propels the Bodhisattva with great force along the path to supreme enlightenment.³⁵

The Bodhisattva Path and the Motivation of Great Compassion (*Mahākaruṇā*)

The extraordinary story of Medicine-King Bodhisattva's former deeds, particularly his acts of self-immolation, can only be fully comprehended when situated within the broader doctrinal framework of the Mahayana Bodhisattva path. His actions are not the product of a morbid asceticism but are the ultimate expression of a specific spiritual ideal, one that is animated by a boundless and all-encompassing compassion for every living being.

The Bodhisattva Ideal: A Vow for All Beings

The central figure in Mahayana Buddhism is the Bodhisattva, a "being of enlightenment." This ideal represents a significant evolution from the *Arhat* ("worthy one") ideal prominent in earlier Buddhist traditions, which emphasizes the attainment of one's own liberation from the cycle of suffering. The Mahayana path reorients this goal outward. A Bodhisattva is defined as any individual who has generated *bodhicitta*—a spontaneous, heartfelt, and compassionate aspiration to achieve the state of a fully enlightened Buddha, not for their own sake, but for the liberation of *all* sentient beings.²³

The Bodhisattva Vow, a formal commitment to this path, entails the radical promise to remain within the world of suffering (*saṃsāra*), willingly postponing one's own entry into the final peace of *nirvāṇa*, until every last being has been guided to enlightenment.³⁹ This is what the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* calls the Bodhisattva's "great sacrifice for others".⁴² They choose to continue the cycle of rebirth in difficult realms like the Saḥā-World because that is where their help is most needed. This ideal presents a radical redefinition of heroism. Conventionally, a hero is one who overcomes external threats and preserves life, especially their own. In the Bodhisattva framework, the ultimate spiritual hero is one who courageously relinquishes the desire for personal peace and willingly embraces continued engagement with suffering out of love for others. Their heroism is measured not by self-preservation but by their capacity for self-surrender for the sake of the collective good.²³

The Driving Force: Great Compassion (*Mahākaruṇā*)

The primary motivation and animating force behind this extraordinary vow is **great compassion**, or ***mahākaruṇā***.²³ This concept is central to the Mahayana worldview and represents a quality far deeper than ordinary pity or sympathy. *Mahākaruṇā* is a profound, non-discriminating empathy that feels the suffering of all beings as its own and is coupled with an unwavering, active commitment to alleviate that suffering.⁴³ It is the engine of the Bodhisattva path.

This great compassion is the definitive answer to the question that opens the chapter: "Why does Medicine-King Bodhisattva walk about this Saḥā-World?"² He endures the "bitter practices" of this world because his being is defined by *mahākaruṇā*. His specific vows, as his name implies, are to cure living beings of their illnesses—both the physical ailments that plague their bodies and the deeper spiritual sicknesses of greed, hatred, and ignorance that bind them to *saṃsāra*.⁴ The presence of a Bodhisattva in a world of suffering is not a punishment or a burden to be endured; it is the most natural and necessary expression of their fundamental nature. The existence of suffering beings and the compassionate activity of the Bodhisattva are inextricably linked; one necessitates the other. The story of Medicine-King's sacrifice is the ultimate, dramatic answer to *why* a Bodhisattva remains: because this is what compassion of this magnitude looks like in action.

Compassion and Wisdom: The Two Wings of Enlightenment

The Bodhisattva path is often described as being like a bird that requires two wings to fly: the

wing of compassion (*karuṇā*) and the wing of wisdom (*prajñā*).³⁹ Compassion without wisdom can be misguided and ineffective, leading to sentimental attachment. Wisdom without compassion can become cold, sterile, and self-centered, leading to a desire for personal liberation alone. The path to full Buddhahood requires the perfect, inseparable union of both.

The story of Medicine-King Bodhisattva serves as a perfect illustration of this essential synthesis.

- **His wisdom (*prajñā*)** is demonstrated by his profound understanding of the doctrine of no-self (*anātman*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*). It is this wisdom that allows him to see his body not as a precious self to be protected, but as a "false combination of the four elements," a tool to be used and offered without attachment or fear.⁴ His sacrifice is not an emotional, impulsive act but one grounded in a deep, philosophical realization of the nature of reality.
- **His compassion (*karuṇā*)** is the driving motivation for the entire sequence of events. It is his compassion for all beings that led him to cultivate affinities with them for countless eons, earning him the name "All Beings Delight in Seeing." It is his compassionate gratitude to the Buddha for revealing the path to liberation that inspires his supreme offering. And it is the merit generated from this compassionate act that he dedicates to the ultimate benefit of all. The act of self-immolation, therefore, becomes a powerful teaching in itself, a beacon of light intended to inspire and guide countless other beings toward their own liberation.⁴⁶

In this narrative, wisdom provides the means for the sacrifice, while compassion provides the reason. Together, they transform an act of apparent self-destruction into the highest expression of enlightened activity.

A Tradition of Sacrifice: Medicine-King in the Context of Buddhist Hagiography

The dramatic account of Medicine-King Bodhisattva's self-sacrifice, while unique in its specific motivations, is not an isolated phenomenon within Buddhist literature. It belongs to a rich and extensive tradition of hagiography that extols the virtue of relinquishing one's body for a higher purpose. By comparing the narrative in Chapter 23 to other prominent stories of sacrifice, particularly those found in the *Jātaka* tales and the mythologies of other great celestial Bodhisattvas, we can better appreciate both the common thematic threads and the distinct doctrinal emphasis of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The Precedent of the *Jātaka* Tales

The *Jātaka* tales, a vast collection of stories recounting the previous lives of Śākyamuni Buddha on his long path to enlightenment, are foundational to the concept of the Bodhisattva's career.⁴⁷ These narratives are replete with episodes of extreme self-sacrifice, which serve to illustrate the Bodhisattva's cultivation of the perfections (*pāramitās*), especially the perfection of generosity (*dāna pāramitā*).¹⁹ These tales established a clear and popular scriptural precedent for the "gift of the body" as a supreme act of virtue.

- **Example 1: The Starving Tigress (*Vyāghrī-jātaka*):** Perhaps the most famous *Jātaka* of this type tells of the Bodhisattva's life as a prince named Mahāsattva (or Sattva). While walking in a forest, he discovers a tigress so weakened by starvation after giving birth that she is on the verge of eating her own cubs. Moved by an overwhelming and "infinite compassion," the prince resolves to save them. Realizing the tigress is too weak even to kill him, he first wounds himself to offer her his blood and then throws his body from a cliff, offering his lifeless form as a meal to save the entire tiger family.²⁴
- **Example 2: The Selfless Hare (*Śaśa-jātaka*):** In another well-known tale, the Bodhisattva is reborn as a wise and virtuous hare. When the god Śakra, disguised as a weary traveler, comes asking for food, the hare's friends—an otter, a jackal, and a monkey—offer the fish, meat, and fruit they have gathered. The hare, having only grass to offer, instructs the traveler to build a fire. In an ultimate act of hospitality, he shakes the insects from his fur to spare their lives and then leaps into the flames, offering his own roasted body as a meal. Śakra, revealing his true form, is so moved by this selfless act that he prevents the hare from being burned and magically paints his image on the face of the moon as an eternal memorial to his virtue.¹⁹

These and countless other *Jātaka* stories firmly embed the concept of bodily sacrifice within the Buddhist narrative tradition, framing it as the pinnacle of compassionate action and a necessary component of the long journey to Buddhahood.²⁶

Sacrifices of Other Celestial Bodhisattvas

The theme of sacrifice extends beyond the past lives of Śākyamuni to the mythologies of the great celestial Bodhisattvas of the Mahayana pantheon, who embody specific aspects of enlightenment.

- **Avalokiteśvara:** As the very embodiment of compassion (*karuṇā*), Avalokiteśvara's mythology contains a powerful story of sacrifice born from overwhelming empathy. One popular legend recounts that after making a vow to liberate all beings from *saṃsāra*, he

worked tirelessly for eons. Upon looking back, however, he saw that the world was once again filling with suffering beings, as numerous as before. In a moment of profound despair at the seemingly impossible task, his heart broke, and his head shattered into a thousand pieces. The Buddha Amitābha, his spiritual father, compassionately reassembled the fragments, transforming them into eleven heads, allowing Avalokiteśvara to see and hear the cries of suffering in all ten directions simultaneously.⁴² This is not a planned, ritual offering, but a spontaneous, mythical expression of a compassion so vast it shatters the physical form.

- **Maitreya:** The future Buddha, Maitreya, who embodies loving-kindness (*maitrī*), is also associated with acts of sacrifice in his past incarnations. One such figure, the Chinese layman Mahasattva Fu, is considered an emanation of Maitreya. During a time of famine, he sold all his possessions to feed the poor and even planned a "fiery self-immolation" as a supreme offering to benefit all who were suffering.⁴²

Comparative Analysis: What Makes Medicine-King's Sacrifice Unique?

While the theme of self-sacrifice is a common thread, the specific context and motivation of Medicine-King's offering in the *Lotus Sūtra* give it a unique doctrinal significance. A comparative analysis reveals a clear distinction in purpose. The sacrifices in the *Jātaka* tales are almost always motivated by an immediate, tangible need of another being: feeding a starving tigress, providing a meal for a hungry guest. The primary virtue is direct, compassionate intervention. Avalokiteśvara's sacrifice is an involuntary, mythic consequence of his boundless empathy.

Medicine-King's sacrifice, however, is unique in its primary motivation. It is not performed to directly save another being from immediate physical harm. Instead, it is an act of **devotion and profound gratitude offered directly to a Buddha and to the Dharma itself**, specifically for the gift of hearing the *Lotus Sūtra*.¹⁴ It is a *pūjā* (a ritual offering) of the highest and most absolute order. While the merit generated from this act will undoubtedly benefit all beings, its stated purpose is to repay the kindness of the Buddha who revealed the ultimate teaching. This thematic shift moves the focus from compassion for beings (*sattva-karuṇā*) to reverence for the teaching (*dharma-karuṇā*).

This distinction suggests a diversification, and perhaps an evolution, of the self-sacrifice motif within Buddhist literature. The *Jātaka* tales, representing an earlier narrative layer, emphasize sacrifice as direct, compassionate aid. The mythology of Avalokiteśvara presents sacrifice as a spontaneous embodiment of a Bodhisattva's core quality. The *Lotus Sūtra*, a quintessential Mahayana text, elevates the motivation to a more abstract and philosophically profound level: sacrifice as the ultimate expression of devotion to the supreme Dharma.

Bodhisattva / Past Life	Nature of Sacrifice	Immediate Motivation	Scriptural Source	Primary Virtue Exemplified
Medicine-King (as All Beings Delight in Seeing)	Auto-cremation of body; Burning of arms for 72,000 years.	Gratitude to the Buddha Sun-Moon-Pure-Bright-Virtue for teaching the <i>Lotus Sūtra</i> .	<i>Lotus Sūtra</i> , Ch. 23 ²	Devotion (<i>Bhakti</i>) / Vigor (<i>Vīrya</i>); Offering for the Dharma.
Śākyamuni (as Prince Sattva)	Offering his body as food to a starving tigress and her cubs.	Immediate compassion to prevent the tigress from eating her young and to save all their lives.	<i>Jātaka Tales (Vyāghrī-jātaka)</i> ²⁴	Generosity (<i>Dāna</i>) / Compassion (<i>Karuṇā</i>); Benefiting living beings directly.
Śākyamuni (as the Hare)	Jumping into a fire to offer his body as food for a guest.	Fulfilling the duty of hospitality and generosity when no other food was available.	<i>Jātaka Tales (Śaśa-jātaka)</i> ⁴⁸	Generosity (<i>Dāna</i>) / Moral Precepts (<i>Śīla</i>); Upholding sacred duty.
Avalokiteśvara	Head bursting into eleven pieces.	Overwhelming despair and empathy upon seeing that suffering beings are innumerable and endless.	Mahayana Mythology ⁴²	Compassion (<i>Karuṇā</i>); A direct, involuntary manifestation of empathy.

The Primacy of the Sutra and the Promise of Buddha-Nature

After establishing the story of Medicine-King's sacrifice as the pinnacle of physical devotion, Chapter 23 executes a crucial and dramatic doctrinal pivot. The Buddha, having just lauded the offering of the body as the "foremost giving," proceeds to reveal a practice that is even more meritorious and profound. This rhetorical reversal serves to highlight the ultimate message of the chapter and, indeed, of the *Lotus Sūtra* as a whole: the supreme power of the Dharma itself to effect liberation and the innate capacity within all beings to realize this truth.

The Great Reversal: The Merit of the Sutra Surpasses All Offerings

In a statement that reframes the entire narrative, the Buddha declares that the merit acquired by a person who accepts, embraces, and upholds even a single four-line stanza (*gāthā*) from the *Lotus Sūtra* far surpasses the merit gained from Medicine-King's extraordinary acts of self-immolation.¹⁵ The giving of one's countries, cities, wives, and children cannot match it; even the offering of one's own body pales in comparison to the merit of engaging with the *Sūtra*.¹⁴

To underscore this point, the text establishes the unparalleled status of the *Lotus Sūtra* as the "King of all Sutras".¹⁵ A series of ten powerful analogies is employed to illustrate its supremacy. Just as the great ocean is foremost among all rivers and streams, the *Lotus Sūtra* contains and subsumes all other teachings. Just as Mount Sumeru is the highest of all mountains, the *Lotus Sūtra* is the pinnacle of the Dharma. Just as the moon is the king of the stars, and the sun dispels all darkness, the *Lotus Sūtra* is the most luminous of all scriptures, capable of dispelling the fundamental darkness of ignorance.¹⁸ This emphatic declaration makes the chapter's ultimate point clear: the highest and most profound offering is not the sacrifice of the physical body, but the acceptance, practice, and propagation of the supreme Dharma contained within the *Sūtra*.¹⁵

The Story as a Test of Faith and a Gateway to Realization

This doctrinal pivot reveals the sophisticated rhetorical strategy of the chapter. The epic narrative of Medicine-King's sacrifice is not an end in itself. It functions as a powerful literary

device to establish the absolute zenith of devotional practice achievable through physical and material means. The story sets an almost unimaginably high standard for devotion, pushing the concept of giving to its most extreme conclusion. Only after establishing this peak does the Buddha reveal a path that transcends it.

The story is therefore not intended to be a literal model for imitation, a fact underscored by its supernatural scale (burning for thousands of years, illuminating millions of worlds). Instead, it is meant to inspire in the practitioner the same level of seriousness, reverence, and total commitment in their engagement with the *Sūtra*. If a great Bodhisattva would willingly offer his very life out of gratitude for this teaching, then an ordinary person should approach it with the utmost faith and dedication. The narrative serves as a gateway, using a story of extreme physical asceticism to open the door to a more accessible, yet even more profound, practice centered on faith in the text itself. This structure radically democratizes the path to enlightenment. The heroic feats of Medicine-King are described as austerities "beyond the capabilities of ordinary people".⁴ This is an exclusive path for spiritual virtuosos. However, the act of accepting, reading, reciting, and upholding the *Lotus Sūtra* is a practice available to everyone, from ordained monastics to lay practitioners in their daily lives.⁵² This shift perfectly aligns with the *Lotus Sūtra*'s central theme of the "One Vehicle" (*ekayāna*), which opens the gate of Buddhahood to all. The story of the elite ascetic thus serves, paradoxically, to empower the ordinary practitioner by revealing that the key to the highest merit lies not in an inimitable physical act, but in an accessible act of faith.

Awakening the Inner Buddha: The Doctrine of Buddha-Nature (*Tathāgatagarbha*)

Underpinning this entire teaching is the core Mahayana doctrine of the universal potential for enlightenment. The revolutionary message of the *Lotus Sūtra* is its unequivocal assertion that all sentient beings—without exception for capacity, gender, social status, or past deeds—possess the innate capacity to attain Buddhahood.⁵² This inherent potential is known as **Buddha-nature** (Skt. *buddhatā*) or, more technically, **Tathāgatagarbha**, which can be translated as the "embryo" or "womb" of the Tathāgata.⁵⁴

This doctrine posits that a luminous, pure mind—the very essence of an awakened being—is already present within every individual, though it is temporarily obscured by adventitious defilements, like gold hidden within ore or a clear sky covered by clouds.⁵⁵ The primary function of a supreme teaching like the *Lotus Sūtra* is to act as the catalyst that removes these obscurations and allows this inherent Buddha-nature to shine forth. The stories of great Bodhisattvas like Medicine-King are presented as powerful reminders of our own latent capacities [User Query]. They are not merely historical accounts of other beings but are

mirrors reflecting the potential that lies dormant within the reader. They model the path of unwavering determination and profound faith that is required to realize this inherent Buddhahood. The ultimate "offering," therefore, is not the external body but the internal realization of one's own awakened mind. The *Lotus Sūtra* is presented as the master key that unlocks this inner treasure. The entire chapter, with its dramatic narrative and doctrinal climax, functions as a profound dialectic. It begins with the ultimate offering of *form* (the physical body) and concludes by privileging the realization of *emptiness* (the formless Dharma, the true nature of mind). Medicine-King's sacrifice represents the ultimate mastery over the world of form. The Buddha's final teaching then points beyond form to the formless, ultimate truth that the *Sūtra* reveals. The practitioner's spiritual journey is thus mapped out: to move from attachment to form, through the disciplined and devotional use of form (practice, recitation, reverence), to the final, liberating realization of the formless nature of reality.

Conclusion: The Enduring Message of Chapter 23

Chapter Twenty-Three of the *Lotus Sūtra* presents a narrative that is at once challenging and deeply inspiring. The story of Medicine-King Bodhisattva, initiated by the insightful question of Bodhisattva Constellation King Flower, is a multi-layered allegory designed to convey some of the most profound tenets of Mahayana Buddhism. It is a teaching on the true nature of devotion, the illusory reality of the physical self, the unstoppable force of great compassion, and, ultimately, the supreme power of the Dharma to awaken the potential for Buddhahood that lies within all beings.

The Body as a Metaphor

The chapter's most striking feature—the auto-cremation of the Bodhisattva's body—functions as a powerful metaphor for total and unconditional commitment. It takes the most precious and instinctually protected possession a sentient being has, their own physical life, and reframes it as a potential offering for a higher cause. The story is a radical illustration of the principle of "not begrudging one's bodily life" (*fujishaku shinmyō*) for the sake of attaining and honoring the Dharma.²⁰ For the practitioner, this extreme physical act translates into a profound internal imperative: the "burning away" of the ego, the consumption of selfish attachments, and the annihilation of delusion in the purifying fire of dedicated spiritual practice.

The Certainty of Enlightenment

The narrative arc of Medicine-King's journey across vast spans of time provides a powerful message of hope and assurance. It depicts a Bodhisattva facing unimaginable difficulties and undertaking practices of extreme austerity, yet ultimately succeeding through unwavering determination and the power of the Dharma. The miraculous regeneration of his arms after they were burned for 72,000 years is a potent symbol.² It teaches that no true sacrifice made for the sake of the Dharma is ever a genuine loss. Instead, it is a transformative act that purifies karma and inevitably leads to a higher, more complete state of being. The story reminds the practitioner that no matter the difficulties faced in life, the determination to benefit all beings and the certainty of one's own innate capacity for enlightenment will lead to the overcoming of all obstacles.

The Poison of Sahā, The Medicine of Dharma

Ultimately, the chapter is a perfect encapsulation of its protagonist's final name: Medicine-King. The Bodhisattva chooses to operate within the Sahā-World, a realm filled with the "poison" of suffering, conflict, and illusion. His story is a demonstration of the ultimate "medicine": the *Lotus Sūtra*. When this Dharma is applied with the unwavering faith and vigor exemplified by the Bodhisattva All Beings Delight in Seeing, it has the power to transform the greatest suffering into the direct cause for supreme enlightenment. The narrative is not merely a history of a distant Bodhisattva; it is a direct message to the reader. It affirms that we all possess the capacity to follow this path, to take the poisons and challenges of our own lives in this world of endurance and, through the medicine of the Dharma, transform them into the fuel for our own journey toward awakening.

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