

The Unveiling of the Ultimate Vehicle (*Ekayāna*): An Exhaustive Doctrinal Analysis of the *Vyākaraṇa* and Completeness in Chapter Nine of the *Lotus Sūtra*

I. Introduction: Establishing the Hermeneutical Claim of Supremacy

1.1. Contextual Placement of the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*

The *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* (Sūtra of the Lotus of the Wonderful Law), commonly known as the *Lotus Sūtra*, holds a paramount position within the Mahāyāna Buddhist canon. For many Buddhists in East Asia, particularly within the Tiantai, Tendai, and Nichiren schools, it is venerated as the final, complete, and sufficient teaching delivered by Śākyamuni Buddha.¹ This esteemed status arises from its presentation of a revolutionary doctrinal framework that fundamentally reinterprets the nature of Buddhahood and the path toward its attainment. The Sūtra does not merely add new teachings; it radically re-vision both the Buddhist path and the person of the Buddha.¹

The primary theological tension resolved by the *Lotus Sūtra* centers on the disparity among the various teachings delivered by the Buddha over the course of his lifetime. Traditionally, Buddhist practice was categorized into the Three Vehicles: the *Śrāvaka* (Hearer, aiming for

Arhatship), the *Pratyekabuddha* (Solitary Realizer), and the *Bodhisattva* (one striving for supreme enlightenment).² The Sūtra's profound assertion is that these three paths are not ultimate ends but provisional means leading toward a singular, unified goal—the One Vehicle, or *Ekayāna*.¹

1.2. The Doctrinal Basis for Completeness and Superiority

The query correctly asserts that the superiority of the *Lotus Sūtra* lies in its **completeness**, defined as its ultimate scope and inherent capacity to lead all sentient beings to enlightenment, rather than simply having better explanations or relying solely on supernatural occurrences. Completeness, in this doctrinal context, means that the Sūtra encompasses and transcends all preceding and provisional teachings.³ It provides the unifying framework within which all previously taught paths (*Upāya*) are understood as expedient methods, ensuring that Buddhahood is a realizable and universal goal.³

This claim of completeness is validated through a systematic narrative progression throughout the text. Central to this validation is the concept of *Vyākaraṇa*, a prediction or prophecy.⁵ In the context of Mahāyāna Sūtras, *vyākaraṇa* is a formal bestowal by a Buddha upon a disciple, confirming that individual's future achievement of enlightenment (*bodhi*), detailing their future deeds, and specifying the name they will bear as a Buddha.⁵ The prophecies serve as the textual mechanism used to formally demonstrate the universal potential of the *Ekayāna*.

1.3. Overview of Chapter Nine: The Prophecies to Ānanda, Rāhula, and the Two Thousand Bhikṣus

Chapter Nine, titled "The Prophecies to Ānanda, Rāhula, and Two Thousand Bhikṣus," is a pivotal point in the Sūtra's narrative. It follows the granting of prophecies to major, high-ranking disciples, such as Śāriputra, and addresses those whose spiritual status had previously been regarded as fixed or limited.⁷ The chapter specifically extends the prophecy to Brother Ānanda and Brother Rāhula, two figures closely associated with the historical Buddha, and crucially, to a large assembly of two thousand *bhikṣus*.⁷

The significance of this extension lies in the systematic dismantling of the notion of fixed spiritual capacity (*gotra*). In earlier narratives and traditional views, many *Śrāvakas* were understood to be settled on the "low goal" of Arhatship.⁸ If the prophecy were only granted to

the most exceptional or advanced Bodhisattvas, the universal potential of the *Ekayāna* would remain questionable for the common practitioner. By including the two thousand *Śrāvakas*—disciples characterized as being content with the limited goal of Arhatship—the *Sūtra* powerfully demonstrates that no being is excluded from the ultimate path. This transformation from a limited *Śrāvaka* existence to the boundless Bodhisattva path and future Buddhahood serves as the ultimate textual validation for the claim of universal completeness. The narrative structure itself becomes a pedagogical strategy, proving that the singular Buddha-*gotra* is inherent in all.

II. Chapter Nine: Contextualizing the Prophecy and the Challenge to Arhatship

2.1. The Status of the Recipients: Learners and Adepts

The recipients of the prophecy in Chapter Nine are explicitly categorized as representing the full range of the *Śrāvaka* path. The text states that the two thousand disciples consist of "those who study and those beyond study".¹⁰ This duality refers to Learners (those still on the path, or *Śikṣamāṇas*) and Adepts (those who have attained the fruit of Arhatship, or *Asīkṣas*). This inclusion ensures that the prophecy spans the entirety of the Hearer community, maximizing the statement of inclusivity.

The motivation for receiving the *vyākaraṇa* is driven by the actions of Ānanda and Rāhula. After witnessing other disciples receive their predictions, both Ānanda and Rāhula arose, bowed down, and contemplated, wishing, and hoping for the same assurance.⁷ Their rising represents the turning point from personal liberation (the *Śrāvaka* goal) toward the ultimate, universal potential offered by the *Ekayāna*. They serve as proxies for the entire assembly, expressing a collective aspiration for supreme enlightenment.

2.2. The Limitation of Provisional Nirvāṇa

A core tenet of the *Lotus Sūtra* is the Mahāyāna critique of the traditional *Śrāvaka* goal. The attainment of Arhatship, or the Nirvāṇa realized by the *Śrāvakas*, is doctrinally reframed as an

expedient rest.⁹ While it grants temporary cessation from suffering and rebirth, it is deemed an insufficient, "low goal" compared to the highest, complete enlightenment, *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*.³

The Sūtra is explicit in this reframing, warning that monks who believe they have attained the ultimate goal by achieving Arhatship and consequently cease seeking supreme enlightenment are "arrogant people".⁹ The attainment they reached is stated not to be the ultimate goal; rather, the ultimate goal involves obtaining the omniscience of a Buddha, the ten powers, and the thirty-two marks.⁹ This strong assertion establishes the doctrinal necessity of the prophecy in Chapter Nine: to move these disciples beyond their limited contentment and onto the boundless Bodhisattva path.

2.3. The Mechanism of Transformation: The *Vyākaraṇa*

The *vyākaraṇa* serves as the spiritual mechanism that effects this transition. It is defined as a formal prediction detailing the Bodhisattva's future path, their achievement of Buddhahood, and their future name.⁵ For instance, Ānanda-Bhadra is prophesied to become a *Gina* (Conqueror) named Sagarabuddhidharin Abhijnaprapta, whose intellect will be unfathomable as the ocean and who will possess transcendent wisdom.¹³

Crucially, the prophecy addresses and negates the concept of fixed spiritual nature. Before this revelation, the Buddhist lineages (*gotra*) sometimes implied that some beings were permanently settled for the "low goal" of *Śrāvaka* Nirvāṇa.⁸ However, the *Lotus Sūtra* affirms that all disciples possess the potential for Buddhahood, even those who were previously content with Arhat Nirvāṇa.⁸ The text indicates that Arhats belonging to the third class of spiritual potential (the unsettled type) do not enter definitive extinction. Instead, they can change their initial trajectory and proceed toward supreme enlightenment after undergoing "unthinkable rebirths".⁸

The requirement of "unthinkable rebirths" shows that the prophecy does not simply erase the deep karmic fixity of the Arhat path, but rather grants the spiritual mandate necessary to break that fixity. The *vyākaraṇa* is thus a public and spiritual declaration that re-categorizes Arhatship from a final destination to a foundational mid-point, confirming that the distinction between the three lineages is itself an expedient teaching (*upāya*). The inclusion of those who had previously accepted the limited goal solidifies the textual claim that the ultimate reality is the singular Buddha-*gotra* inherent in all beings.

The following table clarifies the dramatic shift in perspective achieved by the *vyākaraṇa* in

Chapter Nine.

Comparative View of Nirvāṇa and the Final Goal

Concept	Traditional Śrāvaka View (Goal before Prophecy)	Lotus Sūtra Ekayāna View (Truth after Prophecy)	Source of Finality
Arhatship	Final, irrevocable spiritual achievement; end of rebirth.	Provisional attainment; a resting place granted by <i>Upāya</i> . ⁹	The Buddha's ultimate wisdom
Nirvāṇa	Complete extinction (<i>Parinirvāṇa</i>) of the aggregates.	The ultimate, eternal state of life; dynamic unfolding of Buddhahood. ¹⁴	The <i>Amṛta</i> (Nectar) of eternal life ¹¹
Capacity for Buddhahood	Fixed by lineage (<i>gotra</i>); limited to certain beings. ⁸	Universal; inherent in all beings regardless of current path. ⁴	The universal <i>Vyākaraṇa</i> ⁵
Ultimate Life Span	Short; finite; ceases at death.	Immeasurably long; participating in the Eternal Buddha. ¹⁵	The revelation of the eternal Dharma

III. The Nectar of Joy: Emotional Transformation and Spiritual Affirmation

3.1. Exegesis of the Gāthā (Verses of Praise)

Upon hearing the Buddha bestow these definitive predictions, the two thousand people,

consisting of both learners and adepts, "jumped for joy and spoke verses".¹⁰ The *gāthā* (verses of praise) they spoke express an overwhelming sense of relief and spiritual realization:

"O World Honored One, Bright-Lamp-of-Wisdom, / Hearing the sound of these predictions, / Our hearts are filled with joy, / As if sprinkled with sweet dew."¹⁰

The address "Bright-Lamp-of-Wisdom" emphasizes the Buddha's role as the illuminator of the disciples' inherent potential, previously obscured by the limited view of Arhatship. The prophecy acts as a lamp, clarifying the boundless nature of the path ahead [Query].

3.2. The Symbolism of Sweet Dew (*Amṛta*)

The central metaphor in the disciples' verses is the feeling of being "sprinkled with sweet dew." The Sanskrit term for sweet dew is *amṛta*, which literally translates to "non-death" or "immortality." In Buddhist thought, *amṛta* is a profound spiritual symbol, signifying the eternal truth of the Dharma and the definitive cessation of the cycle of birth and death, often associated with the ultimate, immortalizing nourishment of enlightenment.¹⁰

For the two thousand *Śrāvakas*, who had been striving for a form of Nirvāṇa defined as ultimate cessation and extinction (*Parinirvāṇa*), the sensation of being sprinkled with *amṛta* signifies the instantaneous realization of spiritual purification and eternal life. This experience stands in stark contrast to the finite extinction they previously sought, confirming that the attainment promised by the *Ekayāna* is fundamentally different in scope and duration.

3.3. Joy as Doctrinal Realization

The overwhelming joy described in Chapter Nine is not merely emotional happiness; it is the profound experiential transformation resulting from the doctrinal realization of their own eternal potential.¹⁶ By receiving the *vyākaraṇa*, they realize that they are embodiments of the Wonderful Dharma and are capable of transforming every aspect of their lives into the life of a Buddha.¹⁶

This collective, visceral joy serves a critical narrative and pedagogical function within the Sūtra. It acts as a spiritual barometer, confirming to the wider assembly that the ultimate truth is now accessible and actualized. The fact that the Arhats—those presumed to be spiritually "settled"—could attain this radical affirmation means that all present beings inherently possess the same capacity.¹⁷ This transformative effect is so potent that it is elaborated upon

in a later part of the text, Chapter 18, titled "The Benefits of Responding with Joy," which details the vast blessings acquired by those who merely hear the Sūtra and respond with affirmation.¹⁸

The joy expressed, symbolized by the *amṛta*, also functions to bridge the narrative gap between personal salvation and cosmic ontology. The personal prophecy granted in Chapter 9 foreshadows the revelation of the Eternal Buddha in Chapter 16 ("The Life Span of the Thus Come One"). The assurance of future Buddhahood is essentially the realization of one's participation in the Buddha's eternal lifespan.¹⁵ The sweetness of the dew is the initial taste of that eternity, linking the transformative narrative event to the Sūtra's comprehensive scope across time and being, proving that the ultimate teaching is not just intellectual, but experiential and complete.

IV. The Completeness Doctrine: Synthesis of the One Vehicle (*Ekayāna*)

4.1. Defining *Ekayāna* and *Upāya*

The philosophical superiority and completeness of the *Lotus Sūtra* are rooted entirely in the doctrine of the One Vehicle (*Ekayāna*). This doctrine posits that there is ultimately only one path: the great vehicle of the Buddha, leading universally to Buddhahood.¹ To explain why the Buddha taught other, seemingly contradictory paths, the Sūtra employs the doctrine of *Upāya-kausālya*, or Skillful Means.¹⁹

Skillful Means asserts that the Buddha, understanding the varying capacities of his students, provisionally taught different levels of doctrine (such as the Three Vehicles) to meet their specific needs, thereby guiding them incrementally toward the ultimate truth.³ These expedient paths served as temporary shelter or a foundational exercise.² The completeness of the *Lotus Sūtra* is defined by its role as the final teaching that reveals these provisional paths for what they are—preparatory steps to the ultimate, shared destination.

4.2. Reconciliation and Subsumption of the Three Vehicles

The Sūtra’s completeness is demonstrated through its inclusive embrace of the three provisional vehicles within the expansive vision of the *Ekayāna*.² The *Śrāvaka* and *Pratyekabuddha* paths, although valid in offering relief from immediate suffering, were limited in scope. The *Lotus Sūtra* reveals that even the Bodhisattva Vehicle, which involves vast dedication to saving others, must also be viewed as a skillful means from the highest philosophical standpoint, leading toward but ultimately transcended by the definitive One Vehicle.²

This synthesis was vital for establishing doctrinal unity in East Asia. Faced with varying and often conflicting Buddhist teachings imported from India, Chinese scholar-priests sought a unifying framework. The *Ekayāna* doctrine provided this solution, allowing for the comprehension and hierarchical placement of all teachings.² For example, the Tiantai and Huayan schools, strong advocates for the Sūtra’s supremacy, rigorously distinguished between the One Buddha Vehicle (the ultimate truth) and the Bodhisattva Vehicle (which is included within the three provisional vehicles, yet still expedient compared to the final reality).²⁰

The assertion of *Ekayāna* superiority served not only as a theological resolution but also as a crucial historical and philosophical legitimation strategy. By positioning all prior paths as merely preparatory, the *Lotus Sūtra* established an overarching metanarrative that centralized religious authority around its own text, transforming potential opposition into subordinate, yet valued, elements of a comprehensive whole.

The relationship between the paths and their ultimate status under the *Ekayāna* is summarized below:

Doctrinal Hierarchy of Vehicles in the Lotus Sūtra

Vehicle Designation	Traditional Goal (Provisional)	Ekayāna Status (Ultimate Reality)	Relationship to Prophecy (Vyākaraṇa)
Śrāvaka Vehicle (Hearers)	Arhatship (Limited Nirvāṇa)	Expedient path (<i>upāya</i>)	Path must be transcended via <i>vyākaraṇa</i>
Pratyekabuddha Vehicle (Solitary Buddhas)	Self-Enlightenment	Expedient path (<i>upāya</i>)	Path must be transcended via <i>vyākaraṇa</i>

Bodhisattva Vehicle (Great Beings)	Highest Perfect Enlightenment (<i>Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi</i>)	Included within the One Vehicle	The practical manifestation of <i>Ekayāna</i>
One Buddha Vehicle (<i>Ekayāna</i>)	Universal Buddhahood	The Absolute, Complete Teaching	The assurance granted by the Buddha

4.3. Completeness as Universal Potential

The core of the *Lotus Sūtra's* completeness lies in its affirmation that all beings, without exception, possess the potential for Buddhahood.⁴ This humanism centers on the tenet of "treasuring the individual," emphasizing that all equally possess the ability to attain absolute happiness, regardless of traditional societal or spiritual distinctions.⁴ The *Sūtra* explicitly states that the eternal Buddha is all living beings, meaning "Ordinary people are Buddhas just as they are".⁴ The only difference between people is the degree to which they realize this fundamental truth in their hearts.

This potential is understood not as a distant, static final state of attainment, but as a dynamic, inherent potentiality that individuals can bring forth from their lives.¹⁴ The objective of the Buddhist path is the dynamic unfolding of the qualities of wisdom, compassion, and courage amidst the realities of daily existence.¹⁴

Furthermore, the philosophical completeness articulated by East Asian scholastic thought, notably in the Tiantai tradition, extends beyond the theological realm to encompass the entire cosmos. The observation is made that "Living beings and their environments always manifest Myoho-enge-kyo".⁴ This recognition of the non-duality of life and its environment confirms that the completeness of the *Ekayāna* is total and requires an active challenge to transform reality; true happiness is impossible if divorced from the environment.⁴ The path to Buddhahood is therefore not an escape from this world but a total, transformative engagement with it.

V. Scholastic Frameworks and The Endurance of the

Ekayāna Claim

5.1. The Tiantai School and Textual Hierarchy (P'an-chiao)

The foundational claim of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s superiority was formalized and rigorously defended by the Tiantai school in China, founded by the Great Teacher Chih-i (T'ien-t'ai, 538–597).¹ Chih-i developed an elaborate system of doctrinal classification known as *P'an-chiao*, which ordered the vast array of Buddhist scriptures based on the Sūtra's premise of *Upāya* and *Ekayāna*. This system placed the *Lotus Sūtra* definitively at the apex, concluding that it contained the ultimate, complete truth, while categorizing all other teachings as provisional.⁴

Later figures, such as Miao-lo (the sixth patriarch), reasserted and clarified the supremacy of the Tiantai teachings, maintaining the essential argument that the Sūtra provided the complete framework for integrating ontology—the true entity of all phenomena—with practice, confirming its status as the all-encompassing teaching.⁴

5.2. The Nichiren Tradition: Human Revolution and Dynamic Buddhahood

In the Nichiren tradition, which derives from Tiantai teachings, the completeness of the *Lotus Sūtra* is manifested through active engagement and the practice of chanting *Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō*.¹⁶ This practice is understood as an expression of profound faith and joy in the "inexpressible true nature of reality" and the realization that the practitioners themselves are the embodiments of the Wonderful Dharma.¹⁶

This tradition emphasizes that the completeness of the Sūtra demands courageous action to challenge and transform individual and collective realities.¹⁴ Buddhahood is seen as a dynamic potential, continually unfolding in life, rather than a final, static state. This perspective strongly supports the core premise of the user's query: the Sūtra's power lies in providing a complete path for actualization in the present moment through compassionate action (the work of the Buddha).¹⁴

5.3. The Prophecy and the Unconditional Invitation

The narrative success of Chapter Nine lies in demonstrating the unconditional nature of the Buddha's invitation. The *vyākaraṇa* granted to the two thousand disciples symbolizes that the limitations and attachments of previous spiritual practice (such as being content with the 'low goal' of Arhatship) are instantaneously superseded by the revelation of the *Ekayāna*.⁸

This event reassures the entire assembly that their potential for supreme enlightenment is inherent and immutable. The Buddha, having dispelled the illusion of limited capacity, utilizes the prophecy to empower those who had previously sought only self-extinction, converting them into active Bodhisattvas dedicated to universal salvation. The completeness of the *Lotus Sūtra* is thereby proven not by theological abstraction, but by the tangible, collective transformation of the most doctrinally challenging group of disciples—the Arhats who believed their journey was already over.

VI. Conclusion: The Realization of Universal Buddhahood

The claim regarding the superiority of the *Lotus Sūtra* being based on its completeness is robustly supported by its unique doctrinal architecture and compelling narrative strategy, exemplified by the events of Chapter Nine. The Sūtra's completeness is not merely a quantitative measure of saved beings, but an ontological truth—the assertion of the *Ekayāna* (One Vehicle) as the singular, ultimate reality that fully encompasses and integrates all provisional teachings (*Upāya*).

The *vyākaraṇa* bestowed upon the two thousand disciples in Chapter Nine serves as the definitive proof of this universal scope. By transforming *Śrāvakas*—those previously considered fixed in a limited pursuit of *Nirvāṇa*—into future Buddhas, the text systematically demolishes the concept of fixed spiritual capacity and confirms that the ultimate Buddha-*gotra* is present in all individuals.

The resulting joy experienced by these disciples, described as being "sprinkled with sweet dew" (*amṛta*), functions as the experiential seal of this transformation. This immediate, visceral affirmation of spiritual immortality links the personal promise of prophecy to the Sūtra's cosmic teaching of the Eternal Buddha. This joy is both the consequence of realizing one's eternal potential and the infectious catalyst for inspiring others in the assembly to

recognize their own inherent capacity for Buddhahood.

Ultimately, the *Lotus Sūtra* does not offer merely better explanations; it offers a complete, dynamic formula for human existence. It moves practitioners from a passive, limited goal of escape (Arhat Nirvāṇa) to an active, boundless mission of compassionate engagement (Bodhisattva practice) in the present world, thus demonstrating its definitive and comprehensive superiority. The completion of the path is revealed as the full, dynamic actualization of wisdom and compassion inherent in ordinary life.

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