

The Vow from the Depths of the Earth: An Analysis of the Bodhisattva Mission from the Lotus Sūtra to the Teachings of Nichiren

Introduction: The Call from the Remote Past

The declaration, "My words are true. Believe me with all your hearts! I have been teaching them since the remotest past," represents more than a simple assertion of faith; it is a profound statement of mission and identity rooted in one of the most dramatic and pivotal moments in Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture. These words, spoken by Śākyamuni Buddha in the fifteenth chapter of the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, or *Lotus Sūtra*, serve as the foundation for a radical soteriological vision. This vision culminates in the understanding that the practitioners of this sutra in the present age are not merely followers awaiting a distant savior, but are the very bodhisattvas who emerged from the earth in that ancient assembly, tasked with the salvation of the world. This report provides a comprehensive exegesis of this theological position, tracing its origins in the scriptural narrative, its philosophical implications, and its ultimate crystallization in the teachings of the 13th-century Japanese monk, Nichiren. The central theme is the transition from a paradigm of awaiting external intervention to one of recognizing and activating the inherent power within the people of this world to enact its fundamental transformation.

To comprehend the significance of this event, one must first understand the critical division of the *Lotus Sūtra* into two distinct halves. The first fourteen chapters are traditionally categorized as the "theoretical teaching" or the "Imprinted Gate" (*shakumon*). In this section, the Buddha is presented as the historical prince, Śākyamuni, who first attained enlightenment in his lifetime under the bodhi tree in Gaya, India.¹ His teachings are tailored to the capacities of his listeners, employing skillful means to lead them gradually toward the truth. The latter fourteen chapters, beginning with the fifteenth, constitute the "essential teaching" or the "Original Gate" (*honmon*).¹ This section reveals the Buddha's true, eternal nature—that his enlightenment in India was merely an expedient display, and that he has, in fact, been a

Buddha since the "remotest past".³ Chapter Fifteen, titled "Emerging from the Earth" (*Jūji-yujuppon*), serves as the dramatic and indispensable pivot point between these two revelations, providing the narrative catalyst that necessitates the disclosure of the Buddha's true identity.⁴

The emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is, therefore, not merely a fantastical interlude but a foundational allegory for a specific soteriological principle: that the mission to propagate the ultimate Law in the world's most difficult and degenerate age belongs exclusively to those who are intrinsically and karmically bound to it. This report will trace the evolution of this principle from its scriptural origins to its radical reinterpretation and application in the teachings of Nichiren. It will demonstrate how this narrative became the basis for Nichiren's self-identification as the leader of these bodhisattvas and, by extension, for the modern practitioner's identity as a Bodhisattva of the Earth, charged with the mission of transforming this world of suffering into a land of peace and enlightenment.

The Cosmic Drama of Chapter Fifteen: "Emerging from the Earth"

The fifteenth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* marks the beginning of the "essential teaching" with a scene of unparalleled scale and theological weight. It unfolds not as a quiet discourse but as a cosmic drama, deliberately constructed to challenge the assembly's understanding of time, identity, and the very nature of the Buddha's mission.

The Initial Vow and the Buddha's Refusal

The chapter opens at the height of the "Ceremony in the Air," with a vast congregation of bodhisattvas who have assembled from countless other worlds and realms to hear Śākyamuni preach.⁴ Moved by profound compassion, these highly advanced beings come forward and make a solemn vow. They pledge to remain in this *sahā* world—a realm defined as a "world of endurance of suffering"¹—after the Buddha's passing. Their mission, they declare, will be to "protect, maintain, read, recite, write out, and make offerings to this Sutra" and to propagate its teachings in the perilous age to come.¹

In a moment of profound narrative tension, Śākyamuni Buddha, the World-Honored One, politely but unequivocally refuses their heartfelt request. He stops them, stating that their

assistance is not required for this monumental task.¹ His reasoning is specific and crucial: "Within my Saha world itself there are Bodhisattvas Mahasattvas... After my Quiescence, all of them will protect, uphold, read, recite, and vastly proclaim this Sutra".⁶ He declares that the *sahā* world already possesses the great bodhisattvas who will carry out this mission.⁴ This refusal is not a slight against the visiting bodhisattvas, who are undoubtedly capable, but a deliberate theological statement. It establishes a principle of immanent soteriology—the idea that the solution to a world's suffering must arise from within that world's own karmic reality. The problems of the *sahā* world are so deeply rooted that they cannot be resolved by well-meaning external agents; they require a force generated from the very soil of its suffering. This act rejects the concept of salvation as an imported grace, setting the stage for the revelation of a power that is native and inherent to this world.

The Earth Trembles and Splits Asunder

Immediately following the Buddha's declaration, the scripture describes a dramatic and auspicious cataclysm. The earth of the three-thousand-great-thousand-land *sahā* world begins to tremble and then splits open.¹ This is not a destructive earthquake but a revelatory parting, a fissure appearing not to swallow but to reveal what has been concealed within the very foundation of this world. The splitting of the earth is a powerful metaphor: the ground of ordinary reality, the world of defilements and suffering, is breaking open to reveal a hidden, enlightened potential that has been dwelling within it all along.

The Magnificent Emergence

From this vast fissure, a host of beings "simultaneously welled forth".⁸ The scale of their appearance defies comprehension. The sutra describes them as "limitless thousands of tens of thousands of millions of Bodhisattvas Mahasattvas," their number equal to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers, each with his own equally numerous retinue.⁴ Their appearance is magnificent, underscoring their supreme state of development. They all possess golden-hued bodies, are adorned with the thirty-two marks of a great person, and radiate a limitless, brilliant light.⁷ This superlative description serves to emphasize that these are not novice practitioners but highly advanced bodhisattvas whose spiritual stature is far beyond that of the visiting bodhisattvas from other realms.⁷ They have been dwelling not in a distant Pure Land, but "beneath the Saha World in the space belonging to this world," awaiting the proper time for their emergence.⁶

Dialogue and Reverence

This awe-inspiring multitude is led by four great bodhisattvas: Superior Practices, Boundless Practices, Pure Practices, and Firmly Established Practices.⁴ Having emerged, they do not remain on the ground but ascend to the great Jeweled Stupa of the Buddha Many Treasures, which is suspended in the air, and where Śākyamuni Buddha is seated.⁸ There, they perform obeisance, bowing their heads at the feet of the two Buddhas in a gesture of profound respect.

Their initial dialogue is not one of boasting or self-aggrandizement, but of deep and personal concern for their teacher. The four leaders, speaking on behalf of the entire assembly, inquire after the Buddha's well-being: "World Honored One, are you in good health and free from worry? In teaching and transforming beings, is he free from weariness?".⁸ This humanistic and intimate tone highlights a long-standing, deeply personal relationship between these disciples and their master, a connection that transcends the formal teacher-student dynamic seen elsewhere.¹

The Foundational Paradox

It is at this point that Śākyamuni Buddha makes the declaration that creates the central paradox of the chapter and sets the stage for the sutra's deepest revelations. He proclaims to the entire assembly that these innumerable, magnificent bodhisattvas who have just emerged from the earth are his own original disciples, whom he has been teaching and transforming "since the remotest past".² This statement is met with astonishment and disbelief, as it seems to directly contradict the known history of the Buddha's life. The assembly, including its most advanced members, is left to grapple with an impossible timeline: how could the Buddha, who attained enlightenment a mere forty-odd years ago, have possibly trained such a vast and ancient assembly of disciples? This question becomes the narrative engine that drives the *Lotus Sūtra* into its most profound doctrinal territory.

The Paradox of the Primordial Disciples: Unpacking the Bodhisattvas' Identity

The Buddha's claim to have taught the Bodhisattvas of the Earth since a time long past creates a temporal and logical conundrum that the assembly, including the venerable Bodhisattva Maitreya, finds utterly confounding.⁴ This paradox is not a flaw in the narrative but its central feature, designed to deconstruct a limited, historical understanding of Buddhahood and replace it with a boundless, eternal one. The identity of these bodhisattvas is thus multifaceted, encompassing philosophical metaphor, karmic destiny, and narrative necessity.

The Core Conundrum

The heart of the paradox lies in the clash between two timelines. On one hand is the historical timeline of Śākyamuni Buddha, who renounced his princely life, practiced austerities, and attained enlightenment under the bodhi tree in Gaya, after which he taught for just over forty years.⁴ On the other hand is the primordial timeline implied by the existence of these disciples, whose sheer number and advanced state suggest a period of training spanning countless eons. The assembly's confusion is natural and logical: how could a teacher of forty years have produced disciples who seem far older and more numerous than could be accounted for in such a short span? This apparent contradiction serves to highlight the inadequacy of viewing the Buddha as a merely historical figure.

Early Interpretations: The Inherent Potential for Enlightenment

Long before the teachings of Nichiren, Buddhist scholars grappled with the meaning of this dramatic emergence. One of the most influential early interpretations came from the Chinese monk Tao Sheng (c. 360–434). He viewed the event not as a literal historical occurrence but as a profound metaphor for a universal truth of Mahāyāna Buddhism. For Tao Sheng, the splitting of the earth and the welling forth of the bodhisattvas symbolizes that "living beings inherently possess an endowment for enlightenment, and it cannot remain concealed; they are bound to break the earth of defilements and emerge to safeguard the Dharma".¹ In this view, the "earth" is the ground of our ignorance and earthly desires (*kleśas*). The emergence of the bodhisattvas represents the irrepressible power of the innate Buddha-nature within all sentient beings, which, when the conditions are right, is destined to break through the surface of delusion and manifest in the world to protect and propagate the truth. This interpretation universalizes the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, seeing them as a symbol of the potential for Buddhahood that lies dormant within everyone.

The Karmic Connection to the *Sahā* World

A deeper analysis of the text reveals a more specific identity for these bodhisattvas, one tied directly to the world from which they emerge. They are not abstract symbols of a universal potential but are beings with a specific and profound karmic destiny. Their emergence from "beneath the Saha World" signifies that they are "karmically entwined with this Saha World".⁷ This intrinsic connection is what distinguishes them from the visiting "cosmic bodhisattvas whose karma is grounded in other worlds, under the teaching and guidance of other Buddhas".⁷

The Buddha entrusts the mission to them precisely because their connection is to this world and its beings. They understand its unique forms of suffering and possess the specific capacity to lead its inhabitants to enlightenment. They are not outsiders performing an act of charity but insiders fulfilling their inherent purpose. This concept establishes that the most effective agents for a world's transformation are those who are part of its very fabric, who have chosen to be born into its challenging circumstances to help others.¹¹ They embody the mediation between the ultimate truth of the Dharma and the conditioned reality of the *sahā* world, making them uniquely qualified to teach the Real Aspect to beings in the Age of Degeneration.⁷

Foreshadowing the Eternal Buddha

Ultimately, the paradox of the primordial disciples serves a crucial narrative function: it is the necessary prelude to the revelation in the sixteenth chapter, "The Life Span of the Thus Come One." The logical impossibility raised by Maitreya—that a forty-year teacher could have disciples from the infinite past—cannot be resolved within the framework of the historical Buddha. The only possible solution is to reveal that the framework itself is an illusion, a skillful means.

To answer Maitreya's question and resolve the doubt of the assembly and of future generations, the Buddha is compelled to reveal his true identity. He explains that his attainment of enlightenment in India was a performance for the sake of sentient beings, and that in reality, "countless kalpas have passed since he first attained enlightenment".⁴ The existence of disciples who have been taught "since the remotest past" is the incontrovertible evidence that necessitates the revelation of a teacher who has existed "since the remotest past." The Bodhisattvas of the Earth are thus the living proof of the Buddha's eternity. Their

sudden appearance shatters the historical conception of the Buddha and prepares the assembly's mind for the sutra's ultimate truth: the revelation of the eternal, original Buddha who is always present in the *sahā* world, continually working for the salvation of all beings.

Maitreya's Indispensable Doubt: The Role of the Future Buddha as Catalyst

In the grand theater of Chapter Fifteen, the role of Bodhisattva Maitreya is not that of a passive observer but of an active and essential catalyst. His expression of profound confusion is the very mechanism that propels the narrative from a display of cosmic power to the revelation of the sutra's deepest doctrine. It is precisely because the questioner is Maitreya—the most advanced bodhisattva present and the designated successor to Śākyamuni—that the paradox becomes inescapable and the subsequent revelation becomes necessary.

Maitreya's Profile: The Designated Successor

To appreciate the weight of Maitreya's doubt, one must first understand his exalted status within the Buddhist pantheon. In all schools of Buddhism, Maitreya is revered as the future Buddha of this world, the direct successor to Gautama Buddha.¹² When the Dharma of Śākyamuni has been forgotten in a future age of decline, it is Maitreya who is prophesied to appear on Earth, attain complete enlightenment, and re-establish the teachings for the benefit of all beings.¹² In the *Lotus Sūtra* itself, he is also referred to by the name Ajita, meaning "Invincible" or "Unconquerable," a testament to his spiritual prowess.¹²

He is considered a Bodhisattva of Equivalent Enlightenment, one step away from supreme Buddhahood, and currently resides in the Tushita heaven, preaching the Dharma to celestial beings.¹² His name is derived from the Sanskrit word *maitrī*, meaning friendship, benevolence, and active, loving-kindness, which is his defining characteristic.¹⁴ Furthermore, as a highly advanced bodhisattva, he possesses memories of his previous lives and knowledge of other worlds, a capacity explicitly mentioned in the user's initial query.

The Function of Maitreya's Questioning

It is this figure of immense wisdom and authority who, on behalf of the entire astounded assembly, voices the collective doubt. After the Bodhisattvas of the Earth emerge, Maitreya formally asks Śākyamuni who these magnificent beings are, where they have come from, what Buddha they follow, and what teaching they practice.⁴ When the Buddha replies that they are his own disciples from the distant past, Maitreya presses the point, articulating the temporal paradox with precision. He respectfully points out the seeming impossibility of Śākyamuni having trained so many countless bodhisattvas in the mere forty-odd years since his awakening in Gaya.⁴ Crucially, he frames his question not merely out of personal curiosity but for the sake of "people in the future who may have doubts about this point," thereby acting as a proxy for all subsequent generations of practitioners.⁴

The Significance of the Doubter's Identity

The narrative's choice of Maitreya as the interlocutor is a masterstroke of doctrinal exposition. If a lesser being had posed the question, their confusion could be dismissed as a product of their own limited understanding. But when Maitreya—the future Buddha, the "Invincible" one, whose wisdom is surpassed only by that of a fully enlightened Buddha—confesses his inability to comprehend the scene, it validates the extraordinary nature of the event. His perplexity signals that what is occurring transcends all known and conventional Buddhist cosmology and timelines. It is a genuine, high-level paradox that cannot be explained away by existing doctrines.

This establishes that Maitreya's doubt is not a sign of his own spiritual deficiency but is, in fact, the highest and most penetrating form of inquiry possible within the "theoretical" framework of the Buddha's historical life. His questioning serves as the perfect foil, creating an intellectual and spiritual tension that cannot be resolved within that framework. The Buddha could simply perform a miracle to silence the doubt, but that would not address the underlying doctrinal issue. Instead, the question from a being of Maitreya's stature demands an answer that is equally profound. It compels the Buddha to shatter the limited, historical paradigm and reveal the deeper, "essential" truth of his own eternity in the following chapter. Maitreya's role, therefore, is that of the indispensable catalyst. He poses the one question that forces the known reality to break, creating the opening through which the ultimate reality of the *Lotus Sūtra* can be revealed.

The Mission Entrusted: Bodhisattva Superior-Practice

and the Latter Day of the Law

While the emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is a spectacle of sheer numbers and magnificence, the *Lotus Sūtra* quickly focuses the narrative on their leadership and their specific, prophesied mission. This mission is not a general charge to do good but a precise entrustment of the sutra's core teaching to a specific group of leaders for propagation in a specific, challenging era. At the forefront of this group stands Bodhisattva Superior Practices, the figure who would become central to Nichiren's own self-understanding.

The Four Leaders

From the incalculable host of bodhisattvas who well up from the earth, four great sages are singled out as their foremost leaders, spokesmen, and guides.⁴ They are:

1. **Superior Practices** (Sanskrit: *Viśiṣṭacāritra*; Japanese: *Jōgyō*)
2. **Boundless Practices** (Sanskrit: *Anantacāritra*; Japanese: *Muhengyō*)
3. **Pure Practices** (Sanskrit: *Viśuddhacāritra*; Japanese: *Jōgyō*)
4. **Firmly Established Practices** (Sanskrit: *Supratīṣṭhitacāritra*; Japanese: *Anryūgyō*)⁴

These names are not merely honorifics but are descriptive of the qualities inherent in the Bodhisattva Path and the practice of the Six Perfections (*pāramitās*).⁵ Their commanding and awe-inspiring presence underscores their supreme spiritual attainment.¹⁶

The Four Virtues of Buddhahood

The Chinese T'ien-t'ai school, whose doctrines heavily influenced later Japanese Buddhism, developed a profound symbolic interpretation of these four figures. According to the T'ien-t'ai priest Tao-hsien, the four leaders represent the four virtues of the eternal Buddha's life as revealed in the *Nirvana Sūtra* and implied in the *Lotus Sūtra*: True Self, Eternity, Purity, and Happiness (or Joy).¹

- **Bodhisattva Superior Practices**, as the chief of the four leaders, represents the cardinal virtue of **True Self** (*shinga*).¹⁷ This is not the small, impermanent, ego-driven self of ordinary beings, but the great, boundless, and authentic self of the Buddha. It is a self that is paradoxically characterized by selflessness (*anātman*), one that is eternal, free,

and identified with the ultimate reality of Nirvana.²⁰

The Entrustment of the Law

While the Bodhisattvas of the Earth make their dramatic appearance in Chapter 15, the formal entrustment of their mission takes place in the "Supernatural Powers of the Thus Come One" (21st) chapter. In this chapter, after displaying his vast powers to demonstrate the truth and profundity of his teaching, Śākyamuni Buddha formally transfers the essence of the *Lotus Sūtra* to these disciples from the remote past.²¹ He specifically charges Bodhisattva Superior Practices and his followers with the great vow and responsibility of propagating this ultimate Law in the future.¹⁸ This act of transmission is the culmination of the drama that began with the Buddha's refusal of the bodhisattvas from other worlds; the rightful heirs to the teaching have now appeared and formally received their inheritance.

The Mission for the Latter Day of the Law (*Mappō*)

The context for this entrustment is of paramount importance. The mission is not for the Buddha's own time, nor for the period immediately following his passing. It is specifically for the "evil and corrupt age of the last five-hundred-year period," also known as the Latter Day of the Law (*mappō*).¹ This is a prophesied era of decline and confusion, when the Buddha's teachings would become obscured, distorted, or forgotten, and when suffering and conflict would be rampant.⁷

The Bodhisattvas of the Earth, therefore, are specialists. Their vow is to appear in this most difficult of times and to teach the fundamental Law that can lead all people to enlightenment, even amidst the greatest misery and hardship.²¹ They are described as "experts in the art of life who help people transform themselves on the most fundamental level and gain true inner happiness".¹⁷ Their task is to impart hope to the suffering, to awaken others to their own Buddha-nature through sincere dialogue, and to demonstrate through their own character the power of the Mystic Law.¹⁷ They voluntarily choose to be born into the most challenging circumstances to fulfill their vow to save all beings.¹¹ This specific mission, for this specific age, is the sacred charge given to Superior Practices and his followers.

Nichiren's Realization: The Votary of the Lotus Sūtra and the Embodiment of Superior-Practice

The prophecies and allegories of the *Lotus Sūtra* found their most dynamic and controversial interpretation in the life and teachings of Nichiren (1222–1282). For him, the sutra was not merely a philosophical text but a blueprint for action and a prediction of his own life's course. He saw the turmoil of his era as the prophesied Latter Day of the Law and came to believe that he himself was the incarnation of Bodhisattva Superior Practices, fulfilling the mission entrusted in the sutra.

Historical Context: The Age of *Mappō*

Nichiren lived in a period of profound crisis in Japan. The 13th-century Kamakura period was marked by unprecedented social and political upheaval, including widespread famine, devastating epidemics, political instability within the ruling shogunate, and the imminent threat of invasion by the Mongol Empire.²⁴ Many in Japan believed they were living in the age of *mappō*, the Latter Day of the Law, an era of decline and conflict when the Buddha's teachings would lose their power to save people.²⁴ This pessimistic worldview led many Buddhist schools to emphasize teachings of escape, such as aspiring for rebirth in a pure land after death, viewing this world as a defiled realm to be despised.¹⁷ Nichiren, however, saw these disasters not as a reason for despair, but as the precise conditions foretold in the *Lotus Sūtra* for the appearance of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth.¹⁷

From Tendai Study to Exclusive Devotion

Nichiren began his formidable Buddhist education within the Tendai school, the dominant tradition of his time, which revered the *Lotus Sūtra* as the supreme teaching of Śākyamuni Buddha.²⁴ The Tendai tradition, however, had become syncretic, incorporating practices from other schools such as Shingon esoteric rituals and Pure Land chanting.²⁷ After years of intensive study, Nichiren concluded that this inclusive approach was a dilution of the sutra's power and a cause of the nation's suffering.²⁷ He asserted that in the corrupt age of *mappō*, the provisional teachings of other schools were no longer effective and, in fact, constituted a "slander of the Dharma" (*hōbō*).²⁴ He declared that only exclusive devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra*,

embodied in the single practice of chanting its title, or *daimoku*—*Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*—was the direct path to enlightenment for all people in this age.²⁴

"Reading the Sutra with One's Body"

Nichiren's advocacy for this exclusive practice was not a quiet, scholarly pursuit. He chose the method of *shakubuku*, a "harsh method" of Dharma preaching that involved explicitly rebuking what he saw as the erroneous views of other schools and the government that supported them.²⁴ He taught that this was the most compassionate act, as it would awaken people to the one true Law. This aggressive stance inevitably brought him into direct conflict with the authorities and the established religious orders.

As a result, he faced a lifetime of intense persecution, including slander, physical assault, exile to remote islands, and a near-execution at Tatsunokuchi.²⁵ The *Lotus Sūtra* itself, particularly in the "Encouraging Devotion" (13th) chapter, explicitly predicts that its votaries in the evil age after the Buddha's death will be met with hatred, jealousy, and attacks by "swords and staves" from ignorant and arrogant people.²² Rather than seeing his hardships as a sign of failure, Nichiren saw them as profound proof that he was correctly practicing the sutra's teachings. He was, in his own words, "reading the Lotus Sutra with one's very body" (*shikidoku*), living out its prophecies and demonstrating their truth through his own suffering.²⁵

The Realization of Identity

It was through this crucible of persecution that Nichiren's conviction of his own identity and mission was forged. He came to see himself as the "votary of the Lotus Sutra" (*Hokke no gyōja*) prophesied in the text.³¹ More specifically, he concluded that he was fulfilling the unique mission entrusted to the Bodhisattvas of the Earth and their leader, Superior Practices.¹

While Nichiren was often circumspect in his claims, the identification is clear throughout his later writings.

- In his major treatise "The Opening of the Eyes" (*Kaimoku-shō*), written in 1272 during his exile on Sado Island, he strongly implies this identity by connecting his own struggles with the mission of Superior Practices.³⁵
- In other works, he refers to his propagation efforts as the work of Bodhisattva Superior

Practices and describes himself as the bodhisattva's "envoy".¹⁸

- He adopted the name Nichiren (Sun Lotus), directly linking himself to imagery associated with the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in the sutra.
- After the Tatsunokuchi Persecution in 1271, an event he viewed as his symbolic death and rebirth ("casting off the transient and revealing the true"), he began to teach from the standpoint of the Buddha of the Latter Day, the original teacher who awakens people to the ultimate Law.³⁶

This self-identification was not a claim to personal godhood or a display of arrogance. For Nichiren, it was a profound realization of his *function* and responsibility in the age of *mappō*. He believed he was the person destined to fulfill the vow of Superior Practices: to be the first to chant and establish the practice of *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* in the Latter Day of the Law, thereby opening the path to Buddhahood for all humanity.¹⁸

From Scripture to Practice: The Doctrine of "We Are the Bodhisattvas of the Earth"

The culmination of Nichiren's theological framework is arguably his most radical and empowering doctrine: the extension of the identity of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth from a single, prophetic figure—himself—to all people who embrace and practice the *Lotus Sūtra*. This move transformed a mythological allegory into a living, breathing reality for ordinary individuals, democratizing the mission of world salvation and placing it directly in the hands of his followers.

The Democratization of the Mission

Nichiren's logic was direct and profound. If he, by fulfilling the prophecies of the *Lotus Sūtra* through his actions, was the reincarnation of the leader, Superior Practices, then it followed that his disciples who took up the same practice and shared in the same mission were the members of that leader's retinue. They were the "followers of Superior-Practice" mentioned in the user's query. In his writing "The True Aspect of All Phenomena," Nichiren made this connection explicit and unequivocal:

"There should be no discrimination among those who propagate the five characters of Myoho-renge-kyo in the Latter Day of the Law, be they men or women. Were they not Bodhisattvas of the Earth, they could not chant the

daimoku. At first only Nichiren chanted *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo*, but then two, three, and a hundred followed, chanting and teaching others. Propagation will unfold this way in the future as well. Does this not signify 'emerging from the earth'?"¹

This passage is the doctrinal cornerstone for the identity of modern practitioners. The emergence from the earth is not a singular, past event but an ongoing process, re-enacted every time a new person begins to chant and share the teaching.

The Practice as the Catalyst for Emergence

In Nichiren's Buddhism, the act of chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* is far more than a simple devotional recitation or a prayer for benefits. It is the very mechanism of "emerging from the earth".¹ The "earth" symbolizes the fundamental darkness and delusion inherent in life, the ground of suffering in the *sahā* world. Chanting the *daimoku* is the act that allows one to "break the earth of defilements" and cause the inherent, enlightened nature of the Bodhisattva of the Earth to well forth from within.¹

Nichiren taught that the ultimate Law is not something to be sought outside oneself; it is inherent in one's own life.³⁰ The practice of chanting is the key that unlocks this inner potential, awakening one simultaneously to their own innate Buddhahood and to their profound mission in the world. The spread of this practice from one person to two, to a hundred, and then to millions, is the modern fulfillment of the sutra's vision of the "limitless thousands of tens of thousands of millions of Bodhisattvas" welling forth.¹

The Mission of Modern Practitioners

To awaken to one's identity as a Bodhisattva of the Earth is to awaken to a profound mission, known in Nichiren Buddhism as *kosen-rufu*, which translates to the widespread propagation of the Mystic Law for the sake of world peace.²¹ This mission is not abstract but is grounded in concrete, compassionate action.

- It involves actively reaching out to those who are suffering, teaching them the Law, and walking with them on the path of transforming their destiny, based on the conviction that "those who suffer the most have the right to enjoy the greatest happiness".¹⁷
- It is a fundamentally world-engaging Buddhism. The goal is not to escape the *sahā* world but to transform it, here and now, into the Buddha's Pure Land, a "Land of Eternally

"Tranquil Light" where people can live in peace and happiness.¹⁷ This stands in stark contrast to the world-rejecting views prevalent in other schools of his time.¹⁷

- This mission is a "great vow" shared by mentor and disciple, from the eternal Buddha to Superior Practices, to Nichiren, and to contemporary practitioners, creating an unbroken lineage of commitment to the salvation of all humanity.²¹

Comparative Doctrinal Analysis: A Soteriological Rorschach Test

Nichiren's radical, action-oriented interpretation of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth becomes even clearer when contrasted with the views of the Tendai and Zen schools, both of which also hold the *Lotus Sūtra* in the highest esteem. The emergence narrative in Chapter Fifteen functions as a kind of doctrinal Rorschach test, revealing the core soteriological emphasis—the fundamental theory of salvation—of each school.

The Tendai school, from which Nichiren emerged, maintained the comprehensive, syncretic philosophical system of its Chinese T'ien-t'ai origins. For Tendai, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth are an integral part of a vast cosmic map, demonstrating the all-encompassing nature of the Buddha's "One Vehicle" teaching. They are figures for reverence and philosophical contemplation within a system that allows for a variety of valid practices—including meditation, esoteric rituals, and Pure Land chanting—as skillful means leading to the same ultimate goal.²⁷ Salvation is achieved through a comprehensive understanding of this inclusive system and engagement in its varied practices.

The Sōtō Zen school, founded in Japan by Dōgen, took a different approach. Dōgen revered the *Lotus Sūtra* but focused on the *implication* of the Bodhisattvas' appearance.¹ For him, this event symbolized a fundamental shift from a "progress philosophy" of gradual attainment over many lifetimes to a "leap philosophy" of immediate, direct realization of one's inherent Buddha-nature.¹ The emergence from the earth is an internal metaphor for this sudden awakening. As Zen Master Mumon stated, "The treasures of the house do not come in through the front gate," meaning enlightenment is not found externally but is discovered within.⁵ The Bodhisattvas are a powerful symbol inspiring the practitioner toward this radical interiority, which is realized through the practice of *zazen*, or silent meditation.³⁹ Salvation is found in silent introspection and the direct experience of self-realization.

Nichiren vehemently rejected both of these interpretations. He saw Tendai's inclusivity as a fatal compromise that diluted the sutra's power in the degenerate age of *mappō*.²⁷ He criticized Zen's emphasis on a silent, text-less transmission as a "devilish" teaching that arrogantly discarded the Buddha's own words.²⁷ For Nichiren, the emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth was neither a philosophical component nor an internal metaphor; it

was a literal *prophecy being fulfilled in real-time* through his own life and the actions of his followers. It mandated a specific, vocal, and active practice (*daimoku*) and a concrete social mission (*kosen-rufu*). Salvation, for Nichiren, is achieved through exclusive faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*, vocal practice, and courageous social propagation.

The following table summarizes these divergent paths to salvation, all derived from the same scriptural source.

Feature	Tendai Interpretation	Sōtō Zen Interpretation (Dōgen)	Nichiren Interpretation
Primary Meaning	An element within a comprehensive, inclusive system (<i>ichinen sanzen</i>) that demonstrates the vastness of the Buddha's teaching and the One Vehicle. ²⁸	A metaphor for a "leap philosophy"—a shift to immediate attainment based on fundamental, inherent awakening, not linear progression. ¹	The literal appearance of the designated practitioners entrusted with propagating the ultimate Law in the Latter Day of the Law (<i>mappō</i>). ¹
Identity of the Bodhisattvas	Advanced bodhisattvas within a vast cosmic hierarchy; figures for philosophical contemplation and reverence. ²⁸	A symbol of the inherent Buddha-nature within all beings; the "treasures of the house" that do not come from the outside gate. ⁵	The original disciples of the eternal Buddha; specifically, Nichiren as their leader (Superior-Practice) and his followers who chant <i>daimoku</i> . ¹
Relationship to Practitioner	Figures to be revered; part of a broader devotional and philosophical framework aimed at comprehensive understanding. ⁴¹	An inspirational model for direct, immediate realization of one's own Buddha-nature through the practice of <i>zazen</i> . ³⁹	A direct, literal identity to be awakened to and assumed through faith in the <i>Gohonzon</i> and the practice of chanting

			<i>Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.</i> ²¹
Mission/Practice	Uphold the <i>Lotus Sūtra</i> within a syncretic system of practices including meditation, precepts, and esoteric rituals. ²⁷	Realize fundamental awakening in the present moment through silent meditation (<i>shikan taza</i>), focusing on personal, internal realization. ³⁹	Exclusively propagate <i>Nam-myoho-renge-kyo</i> through active, vocal practice and proselytization (<i>shakubuku</i>) to transform the <i>sahā</i> world into the Pure Land. ²⁴

Conclusion: The Enduring Call to Action in the *Sahā* World

The journey from the scriptural pages of the *Lotus Sūtra* to the lived practice of a modern-day Buddhist is a profound trajectory of theological evolution. It begins with a cosmic drama on Vulture Peak, where the earth splits open to reveal a host of magnificent bodhisattvas. This event presents a deep paradox, questioning the very nature of time and the Buddha's identity, a paradox voiced by the future Buddha Maitreya himself. This narrative tension serves as the catalyst for the sutra's ultimate revelation: the eternity of the Buddha's life.

This powerful allegory has inspired a range of interpretations across Mahāyāna Buddhism. For some, it is a philosophical metaphor for the inherent Buddha-nature in all beings. For others, it is a symbol of a radical, immediate leap to enlightenment. However, it is in the teachings of Nichiren that this story finds its most direct and activist application. For Nichiren and his followers, the emergence of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth is not a historical account to be studied, nor a philosophical concept to be contemplated, but a living prophecy and an immediate, personal call to action. He saw in the turmoil of his age the prophesied Latter Day of the Law and in his own persecutions the fulfillment of the sutra's predictions for its votary. This led him to the profound realization of his identity as Bodhisattva Superior Practices, the leader entrusted with the Law.

The ultimate culmination of this doctrine is its democratization. The mission was not his alone. All who take up the practice of chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* and dedicate their lives to sharing its message are likewise the followers of Superior Practices, the Bodhisattvas of the

Earth. The "emerging from the earth" is the continuous, dynamic process of awakening to this mission. The message is one of radical empowerment, a direct answer to the human tendency to await salvation from an external source. The world does not need to wait for a savior to descend from another realm or to appear in a future time [User Query]. The power to alleviate suffering, to challenge injustice, and to create a world of lasting peace and profound dignity—the "cluster of blessings" brought by the Bodhisattvas of the Earth ¹⁷—is immanent. It resides, potent and ready, within the lives of the ordinary people of this *sahā* world, waiting to be unearthed through courage, compassion, and unwavering faith in the Mystic Law.

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