

Becoming Buddha: Expressions of *avaivartika* in Early Buddhist Mahāyāna *Sūtras*
with particular reference to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Aṣṭa*).

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I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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Abbreviations

<i>Aloka</i>	<i>Abhisamayālaṅkāraloka</i>
<i>Aṣṭādaśa</i>	<i>Aṣṭādaśasāhasrika</i>
<i>AkṣV</i>	<i>Akṣobhya-vyūha-sūtra</i>
<i>Aṣṭa</i>	<i>Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra</i>
<i>BHSD</i>	<i>Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary</i>
<i>Daśa</i>	<i>Daśabhūmika-sūtra</i>
<i>GD</i>	<i>Gāndhārī Dictionary (A Dictionary of Gāndhārī)</i>
<i>GGP</i>	<i>Gaganagaṇjaparipṛcchā</i>
<i>GaṇḍaV</i>	<i>Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra</i>
<i>MPPŚ</i>	<i>Mahaprajñāpāramitā-śāstra</i>
<i>MW</i>	<i>Monier-Williams Dictionary</i>
<i>MV</i>	<i>Mahāvastu-avadāna</i>
<i>Pañca</i>	<i>Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā</i>
<i>PraS</i>	<i>Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthita Samādhi-sūtra.</i> <i>(Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra)</i>
<i>Rgs</i>	<i>Ratnagaṇasamcayagāthā</i>
<i>Śata</i>	<i>Śatasāhasrika</i>
<i>Śgs</i>	<i>Śūraṅgama Samādhi-sūtra</i>

Ugra *Ugrapariṣcchā-sūtra*

T *Taisho Edition*

1. Introduction

The Sanskrit term *avaivartika*,¹ commonly translated as “irreversibility,” appears variously in early Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, particularly in the *prajñāpāramitā* genre of texts. In these texts, *avaivartika* came to be applied to a bodhisattva whose enlightenment had been predicted (*vyākaraṇa*) by a Buddha but perhaps more fundamentally, to those who had attained certainty that dharmas are not produced/do not arise (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*). The *avaivartika* Bodhisattva’s skill in means (*upāyakaūśalya*) was directed to the all-knowing state (*sarvajñā*) of Buddhahood as opposed to the *nirvāṇa* of an *arhat*.² These attributes constituted important doctrinal innovations in early bodhisattva communities³ and are evidenced in such texts as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (forthwith referred to as the *Aṣṭa*), the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā (Pañca)* and the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthita Samādhi-sūtra (PraS)*. The concept of *avaivartika* was later reinterpreted and became systematized in expanded versions of the *Aṣṭa*, forming the seventh or eighth stage on the ten stage (*daśabhūmi*) path of a bodhisattva.

¹ Variants of the term *avaivartika* are discussed in section 4.2 of this study.

² In this context *avaivartika* also had the connotation of not turning away from Buddhahood and so not regressing to the level of a *śrāvaka* or *pratyekabuddha*.

³ Referred to as “Mahāyāna” communities as the movement became institutionalized.

However, it is a notion not commonly studied. Lewis Lancaster (1968) was the first to give the term greater attention in his landmark doctoral dissertation. Nancy Lethcoe (1971) then produced a study of the term based on Kumārajīva's translation of the *Aṣṭa*, closely followed by Edward Conze's works (1975, 1990) based mainly on Nepalese/Sanskrit sources. More recently, two scholars, James Apple and Peter Gilks, noted its occurrence and meaning predominantly within the context of Sanskrit Buddhist texts dating from around eleventh and twelfth centuries. The reason for this apparent dearth of scrutiny, particularly in its early textual usage, is not easy to fathom. As a term predicting Buddhahood and its later integration as a stage on the path to Buddhahood, it is undisputedly important. One is left to conclude that the term itself initially presented an array of challenges because of its polysemous nature. It is my intention in this thesis, to examine relevant texts, with particular attention to Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (*Daoxing Banruo jing* T224), to show how the understanding and development of the notion of *avaivartika* was both a predictor of Buddhahood and used to delineate a stage in the developing path of a bodhisattva in his quest for Buddhahood. In so doing, I will examine a related concept, that of *vyākaraṇa* or prediction, which, when linked to a Bodhisattva, declared his *avaivartika* status.

The concept of *avaivartika* is not a free-standing entity. Embedded as it is in text, and as text is a product of the social/cultural milieu of its time, it seems proper that a

certain amount of contextual historical data needs to be understood from or as forming the background to these literary works which themselves stand in relation to other texts of a similar period. It is in this environment of social/cultural history and intertextuality that I will investigate this term primarily as it was used in the early texts up to the fifth century CE.

As I am dealing with a specific notion within a text, this study is essentially a literary endeavor and, as such, does not take into account the reading of material artifacts. This, as Paul Harrison notes (2003: 116), is due in part to the fact that there is no clear epigraphical or archaeological evidence for Mahāyāna in India before the fifth century CE.

When researching *avaivartika*, this study will pay particular attention to the term as it is used in the *Aṣṭa* recensions, beginning with the first known complete translation, the *Daoxing Banruo jing*⁴ (道行般若經), classified as T224 in the Japanese Taishō Edition,⁵ and translated into Chinese by Zhiqian or Lokakṣema⁶ in 179 CE. Lancaster

⁴ In this study I will use Seishi Karashima's transliteration of the title, *Daoxing Banruo jing*.

Harrison (1993: 141) and Lancaster (1975: 30) transliterate T224 as *Tao-hsing (pan-jo) ching* using the Wade-Giles transliteration system. See Lancaster 1975: 33 for other variants. Where I do not use the Chinese title *Daoxing Banruo jing*, I refer to this text as Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) or simply as the *Aṣṭa* (T224).

⁵ Alternatively named in Chinese the *Da zheng Xinxiu Dazangjing* (大正新脩大藏經) T2145, completed ca. 515 by Seng-yu.

⁶ See Harrison 1993: 13ff. for background information regarding Lokakṣema's translation work.

(1975: 34) notes that there is an array of different titles for the T224, and other Chinese translated *prajñāpāramitā* literature, due to the fact that the texts initially had no titles, and, unlike the Indian system of later naming them according to the number of lines each *sūtra* contained, the Chinese translators named them with reference to some distinguishing feature of the text, for example the heading of the first chapter in Lokakṣema's T224.

The first challenge presented itself almost immediately. Apart from Seishi Karashima's critical edition of the *Aṣṭa* (2011), a complete English translation of Lokakṣema's text, the T224, seemed to be entirely absent, explaining perhaps why most scholars working from the English version have used the Sanskrit/Obermiller/Conze translation, a much-accreted later version of the *Aṣṭa*. Eventually, access to ubiquitous digital resource technology led me to an unpublished English translation of the prose version by William Giddings, using Karashima's critical edition for guidance in difficult sections and submitted as part fulfillment of his PhD dissertation (2010).⁷ With the kind permission of the author I now had the use of a readable English translation of this earliest extant version, bearing in mind the constraints of using a text subjected to a two-tier translation process. Hence, when

⁷Personal communication with William Giddings (on-line 04:05:2022) confirmed that most of the text was his own translation work taken directly from Lokakṣema's Chinese T224 version with references, for clarification, to Karashima's critical edition.

referencing text T224, in particular Chapter fifteen, *The Avivartin*, I am following the numbering system, both chapter and verse, as used by Giddings which differs from the Sanskrit versions of the text as cited by Conze. However, where referencing Sanskrit versions, note will be made of the numbering system used by the particular translator's text under discussion.

With Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) as base text, I proceed to look at expressions of *avaivartika* in this text as well as its usage in other early *sūtras* and *śāstras* dating to the fifth century. In so doing I note its possible development. I use the word "development" with some caution, as it suggests a linear progression of a single text which changed over time. As there is now some scholarly consensus that most of the teachings were initially transmitted orally, this *sūtra* could well have been diffused a number of times with each dissemination becoming its own source of a textual lineage. Most probably only some of these texts found their way into a written format and survive for our study today. With the passage of time, many interpolations appear in the Sanskritized version and Tibetan translation. Questions can be asked as to why these additions appear at this later stage. Did they merely reiterate and expand on existing material or did they reflect a shift in doctrinal importance or in the historical context of the text? Whilst these issues need due consideration it is not entirely within the reach of this study to contemplate such.

Under the category of “early” Mahāyāna Buddhist literature I have extended my research of *avaivartika* to other texts roughly contemporary with, but also appearing in subsequent centuries following the *Aṣṭa* (T224). Here I was obliged to make a selection from texts accessible to me through their translated versions. Texts referred to include the *Mahaprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* (MPPŚ), *Mahāvastu-avadāna* (MV), *Daśabhūmika-sūtra* (Daśa), *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra*, and the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthita Samādhi-sūtra* (PraS).

The term “Mahāyāna” as used to specify the type of Buddhist literature included in this study, seems to have appeared only at a later stage, some centuries after the composition of these early texts. By some accounts (Drews 2021: 38, 42) these texts existed within already established Buddhist social and cultural institutions and show a distinct quality even although the term “Mahāyāna” might not have been in use at this time. Nattier (2003: 164, 100-101) refers to these texts as “bodhisattva” texts/*sūtras* thereby avoiding the ambiguity/controversies generated in academic circles around the use of the term “Mahāyāna” for this early pre-institutionalized period. There is much to say about the use of this term and my additional qualifier “early.” But these will be discussed at a later stage in this study.

2. Methodology

2.1 General Considerations

When reading ancient texts Botha (1998: 53) counsels that it is necessary to respect their remoteness in terms of the passage of time and that ancient wordings realized meanings from within a social/cultural system.⁸ In other words, these texts are not timeless documents and, as such, due consideration needs to be paid to language usage in terms of the historical, geographical, and social/cultural contexts in which they were written. I am not endeavoring a developmental history model of scholarship on textual evidence, but merely noting its importance when attempting to derive meaningful interpretations from textual content. In this study, I am looking at *avaivartika* essentially from a doctrinal point of view, namely, how this term relates to a given doctrinal system in a text. That is to say, the particular notion of *avaivartika* which I am targeting, could be considered the inculcation of a Buddhist ideal and, as such, I am using texts to furnish “evidence” only in this respect, rather than noting this term in a normative setting of how it might have been practiced. However, as Gilks (2010: 22) notes, a doctrinal system entirely separate from a living tradition could be

⁸ See Botha 1998: 53ff. Whilst primarily relating his methodology to Christian studies, Botha generally advocates a more integrated approach to ancient textual interpretation and outlines five criteria by which to achieve this. Botha’s approach draws on various studies of Malina (1994: 168), in particular that of language deriving meaning from the social context of its time.

challenged by the mere existence of a verse summary of the *Aṣṭa*, the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*, (*Rgs*) which “... suggests the possibility of a tradition of oral dissemination of the *sūtras* among non-literate people,”⁹ which would mean that textual traditions are perhaps not that distinct from their living tradition counterparts.

Needless to say, all research has boundaries and so my study is just one account of the expression of *avaivartika*. The particular perspective I have taken reflects the questions I formulate and address using a highly select group of textual sources.

Regarding my choice of textual sources, there are several considerations. First, I will be working with texts which are predominantly witnessed in the late Eastern Han period in China ca. second century CE. through to the fifth century CE. although in some instances I will refer to Sanskrit witnesses of the *Aṣṭa* which appeared in the later Pāla Dynasty, eleventh to twelfth century CE. Using this time frame, my investigation will primarily encompass a study of the term as it is used in the target text, Lokakṣema’s *Aṣṭa* T224, as well as other texts contemporary in time. The second consideration involves the idea of “development,” some of the problems of which I have previously alluded to. For example, can we rightly speak of, or even look for a development of a text? And here I am referring to development in terms of an

⁹ Note also similar findings by Zürcher (1990: 178) in his linguistic study of early Chinese Buddhist texts, where he notes that in most cases the translations used a vernacular idiom entirely devoid of Classical Literary Chinese, a vernacular made for a semi-literate people, comprehensible when recited.

expansion in usage and meaning of a concept such as *avaivartika*. With this in mind, in designing this thesis topic, I have intentionally referred to "expressions" of *avaivartika* in order to investigate aspects of the term's usage at the time when it was used, as well as to look for any possible expanded usage over time, bearing in mind that where any such evolution is noted, it is made as an interpretive assessment on presenting external evidence.¹⁰

Accretions which generally occur in the later versions of the *Aṣṭa* pose a somewhat different quandary. Nattier (2003: 49) raises the question of how to identify a valid procedure for identifying interpolations in later versions. One approach to this issue, albeit rather laborious, was Lewis Lancaster's work-book based method in which he systematically identified accretions and omissions that have no parallels in the early extant versions of the *Aṣṭa*. More recently Karashima, in his critical edition of the *Aṣṭa*, has compared all extant copies against Lokakṣema's T224 translation, again to identify occurrences of additions and in some cases omissions. I draw on both of these excellent, meticulously researched resources in my own study. Regarding these emendations many questions can be posed. Where accretions occur in textual versions, were they expanding on existing ideas in order to clarify them? Or were

¹⁰ External evidence referring to data mined from texts roughly contemporary with and in some instances later than Lokakṣema's T224.

authors of these texts working from independent textual lineages where the initial transmission was in an expanded format? If the latter was the case, then again, a developmental understanding in the usage of the term *avaivartika* needs to be noted with due caution.

2.2 Textual Sources

2.2.1 Working with translations.

As mentioned, the first complete versions of the *Aṣṭa* and other third century Mahāyāna texts are known to us only through their Chinese translations and Chinese scribes, particularly those comprising the early translation teams, are not regarded by scholars for their expertise in either Sanskrit or Prakrit vernaculars.¹¹ By some accounts (Boucher 1998, Karashima 1992) they were unable to consistently distinguish Indian phonemes and find suitable sino-grapheme equivalents.¹² So, Nattier (2003: 70)

¹¹ See Boucher 1998: 471ff. We now have sufficient evidence, by way of recent manuscript fragment finds and through reconstructed pronunciation from transliterated Indic proper names and technical terms to conclude that early Buddhist translations derive from base texts written in Northwest Middle Indic, a Prakrit widely known as Gāndhārī.

¹² The translation process was fundamentally oral/aural in nature. Chinese translators were essentially working from oral recitations and might never have sighted the written text. Finding equivalent Chinese graphemes for sounds encountered in heavily Prakritized Indic texts, often led to incorrect representations.

questions whether these translations correctly reflect the content of their underlying Indic texts. To what degree are they accurate? Boucher (1998: 471-472) has this to say:

Indologists have generally questioned ... the reliability of these first attempted translations as documents for the study of Indian Buddhism.

The majority of our historical data — prefaces, colophons and early biographies, paint a rather dismal picture of the earliest translation teams in China ... it is virtually certain that practically no Chinese of this early period commanded any Indian literary language; and it is not at all clear how these texts were copied, transmitted or preserved. As a result, it has been universally accepted that the translations of later Indian-trained specialists such as Xuanzang, as well as the very literal renderings in Tibetan, are far more trustworthy in the absence of an Indic original.

Boucher (1998: 479) goes on to give many examples of mistakes made. For instance,¹³ in reference to Dharmarakṣa's translation of the *Lotus-sūtra*, due to a confusion in words, the Prakrit verb *bhonti* (they are), is translated as the noun *bodhi*

¹³ Boucher (1998: 479) citing the work of Seishi Karashima (1992) lists many more instances of confusions such as between *kṣ* and *c/ch*, labials *p/v*, confusions related to *-bh-/ -v-*, nasals and *anusvāra*, together with the passages in which they occur.

(enlightenment).¹⁴ This then entirely alters the meaning of the passage in which it is used. Harrison (1998: 5-6), in reference to the *PraS*, notes additional translation problems in that Lokakṣema's Chinese assistants would have been:

... quite unfamiliar with the conceptual content and the idiom of the literature they were helping to translate. To get the message across, Lokakṣema frequently cut the text down almost to the bone.

Silk (2013: 436) concludes that the translation vernacular used in these early manuscripts was rudimentary in style as they were intended for Chinese lay devotees with only an elementary level of literacy. Nattier (2003: 71) notes that an accurate reading can only be deduced with some measure of certainty if we have multiple versions of the one text over time, which allows us to triangulate back to the Indic source. Fortunately, we are able to do this as there are many recensions of the earliest Chinese translations as well as their later Sanskrit parallels translated into Tibetan. On a more positive note, Harrison (1993: 140 fnt. 5) states that:

¹⁴See Boucher 1998: 479 fnt. 45 for many more examples of this confusion between *bhonti*/*bodhi*.

Lokakṣema's translations contain a large number of transliterated proper names and technical terms which aid in reconstructing the phonology of the original language of the sūtras Lokakṣema was working from.

Another, perhaps less pressing question concerning translated material, is whether these texts can be accurately attributed to their recorded authors. Authorial information is important in that it gives us historical data as to a text's chronological status and allows us to compare other extant works by the same author and their relationship to texts/authors of a similar period. As well as this, included in the author's translated Chinese name is often historical data such as his ancestral heritage and in the case of an ordained monk, his teacher's place of learning. Nattier, (2008: 27-28) using the descriptor "ethnikon"¹⁵ for this phenomenon, gives the example of An Shigao. Here, the surname *An* denotes "Parthian" or as in the case of Zhu Fahu (Dharmarakṣa), *Zhu* designates "Indian," indicating that he had studied with an Indian master although born in Dunhuang to a Yuezhi tribe family.

¹⁵ Many of the early Chinese translators were non-Chinese, and so surnames recorded in sources are ethnikons, that is, names which indicate the person's ethnic background but also serve as the family name.

Nattier (2008: 80) confirms the fact that the *Daoxing Banruo jing* (T224) assigned to Lokakṣema, is deemed to be reliable as well as the *Banzhou Sanmei jing* (T418).¹⁶ Lokakṣema's text was revised seven times in subsequent years, but authorial provenance of the second revision, the *Da Mingdu Jing* (T225) is questionable. Karashima, in his critical edition, argues that the seven extant recensions of Lokakṣema's text (T244) correspond to at least four different versions of the text.¹⁷

A further area of possible confusion could arise with the designated section divisions of the *Aṣṭa* where chapter names and page numbering systems differ according to the translation used.¹⁸ Hence the chapter on the "Appearances, Signs and Marks of Irreversibility," a name first designated by Kumārajīva in 408 CE, is numbered seventeen in the Sanskrit Obermiller/Conze translation, whilst the corresponding chapter in the Gidding's English translation of T224, which forms my

¹⁶ The pioneer of Chinese Buddhist bibliography was Shi Dao'an (314-385) who made the authentic author attributions for texts. Nattier (2008: 68) has treated as authentic only those texts by Lokakṣema which are acknowledged by both Shi Dao'an and subsequently recorded in Sengyou's Catalogue. Nattier (2008: 76-77) states that Taishō editors attribute twelve texts to Lokakṣema, but Zürcher accepts only eight as authentic: T224, T280, T313, T350, T418, T458, T626, T807. Harrison (2003: 141,166) also attributes T624 to Lokakṣema but questions the authenticity of T313 and points out that sections of T418 are revisionary and not part of Lokakṣema's corpus.

¹⁷ See Walser 2018: 130 for the four groupings of these seven texts.

¹⁸ Here I note the importance of Karashima's critical edition (2011) with its excellent cross-referencing system for all parallel texts of the *Aṣṭa*.

working translation, is fifteen and named simply *The Avaivartin*. This disparity partly arises due to accretions, particularly in later versions.

2.3 Intertextuality: History, Synchronic and Diachronic reading of Texts

2.3.1 History and Development

The term “intertextuality” as first¹⁹ used by Julia Kristeva in her essay “Word, Dialogue and Novel” (1980: 64-91) proposes that all texts stand in relation to other texts, that text is a dynamic interchange with other writings. Understanding them as such is to know that they are not self-contained, closed systems but are transformations and repetitions of other textual structures. Since this time, Post-modern philosophers such as Derrida, considering existing theories of intertextuality, speak in general terms of texts intersecting through lack of boundaries. Alfaro (1996: 280) notes Gérard Genette’s wider understanding of intertextuality as “transtextuality,” which includes everything, latent or explicit, which relates one text to another. Genette (1989: 10-15) offers five categories of transtextuality, the fourth being “archtextuality” where a text is positioned according to its generic category. This is especially relevant in the

¹⁹ Maria Jesús Martínez Alfaro (1996: 269) points out that whilst Kristeva might be first to coin the term “intertextuality,” she is merely contemporizing this notion; the concept of intertextuality has been around since Socratic dialogue.

investigation of *avaivartika* as it is expressed in what is now designated as the *prajñāpāramitā* genre of texts.

2.3.2 Synchronic and Diachronic Reading of Texts

Here we need to consider the question of how this particular class of texts is related, both synchronically or concurrently and diachronically, over time. Regarding chronology, the only basis we have for accurately dating any given text in this period is by its first translation into Chinese.²⁰ Additional questions can be posed. Is a text in fact derived from a previous one of its kind, a generic model, and if so how?²¹ What qualities/criteria/ideas tie these texts together as a particular class of genre? Could at least some of these texts have developed independently without knowledge of their predecessors? A synchronic reading of the *sūtras* translated by Lokakṣema and his

²⁰ This is not the first evidence we have of an extant *Aṣṭa*. See Falk and Karashima 2013: 297ff. A birch-bark roll in Gāndhārī/Kharoṣṭī script, housed in the Split Collection 2 was identified as containing parallels of *parivartas* 1 and 5 of the *Aṣṭa*, a text likely dating from the first century BCE. Falk and Karashima draw the conclusion that although Lokakṣema's text was similar to the Gāndhārī text it was not the source text but developed from a slightly different tradition. See Sander 2000 for manuscript fragments of an *Aṣṭa* in Brāhmī script, dating to the Kushan era found in the Bamiyan area containing text parallels from 11 chapters.

²¹ See Walser 2018: 165 for a fuller discussion of this. He outlines, using Schmithausen's example, how the Perfection of Wisdom genre is an adaptation of the genre of selflessness teachings to become a *sūtra* on the selflessness of all dharmas, in order to suit the interests of bodhisattva groups.

team allows us to compare translations and examine and detect possible shifts in doctrinal emphasis. In total we have a record of seven Chinese translations of the *Aṣṭa* which are discussed below in section 3.2.1.

Lancaster, in his 1968 dissertation, produced a comparative study of the seven Chinese translations produced over a period stretching some eight centuries, 179-985 CE, against Wogihara's Sanskrit edition. Whilst he concluded that all chapters are present in the Lokakṣema (T224) translation, due to accretions as the text developed over time, structural changes to both the narrative and doctrinal content are evident. Lancaster (1968: 2-3), by examining twelve doctrinal topics, identified one hundred and fifty differences between the earliest version translated by Lokakṣema and the Sanskrit text. His findings also show that it was primarily the emendations of doctrinal passages which resulted in structural modifications to the narrative that in turn altered the entire framework of a text. Further findings illustrated how the contents of the later or "middle texts" (T220, T227), followed the structure of the Sanskrit text more closely than the earlier versions (T224, T225, T226) and that the earlier forms of the *sūtra* appeared to be much closer to the Mainstream position on various aspects of doctrine.²²

²² Lancaster (1968: 3) lists 12 doctrinal topics located in all texts, stating that topics 1-8 are Mahāyāna themes whilst 9-12 are doctrines found also in the Nikāyas and Āgamas and so common to both

A diachronic reading of the later Sanskrit and Tibetan translations, dating somewhere around eleventh century²³ onward, are subject to further redactions and emendations, resulting in a much-accreted version. Again, I note the importance of Karashima's glossary (2010) followed by his critical edition, which draws together in a single study, parallel passages of all extant Chinese, Tibetan and Sanskrit recensions, as a very useful comparative study made against the earliest Lokakṣema text.

2.4 Sociolinguistic considerations: Transmission, Authorial Communities and Intended Audience.

2.4.1 Transmission

Karashima (2015: 113) notes the transmission of so-called Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, according to language and relative chronology in the following way:

- 1) Oral transmission in Prakrit, first century BCE.
- 2) Oral transmission in Prakrit and written in Kharoṣṭhī, first to third centuries CE.

Mahāyāna and Mainstream traditions. See Lancaster 1993: 30-41 for elaborations on four of these doctrinal differences.

²³ Walser (2018: 129) states that the oldest complete Sanskrit Manuscript bears the date of 1061 CE. although this is debated by Rajendralal Mitra who claims that a manuscript in the Cambridge collection bears the date of 1020 CE., a fact disputed by Bendall who believes this date to be 1155 or 1255 CE.

(this theory substantiated by newly discovered fragments of the *Aṣṭa* (Falk/Karishima 2012, 2013) dating back, with a probability of 81.1%, to between 47-147 CE.)

- 3) Broken Sanskrit mixed with Prakrit, second to third centuries CE.
- 4) Buddhist (Hybrid) Sanskrit, written in Brāhmī, third to fourth century CE. onwards.

Harrison (2003: 123) concurs on the point of orality by acknowledging that there would have been an earlier oral Mahāyāna tradition to which written texts were a response, although some Mahāyāna texts would have likely started as written texts. The importance of writing is noted by Harrison who supports Gombrich's (1990) view that the Mahāyāna textual tradition owed its very survival to the early adoption of writing.

2.4.2 Authorial Communities

Questions regarding authorial communities producing these texts are an important consideration. What do we know of the people who produced/authored the texts in this early period and the people who later translated them? Were they related to a doctrinal tradition, and if so, in what manner? What impact did they have on the text authored by them? Was it a re-interpretation or extension of existing texts/notions?

Botha (1998: 57) states that all texts are underpinned by some kind of authorial interest, an ideology, an integrated system of beliefs, assumptions and values which reflect the needs and interests of a group or class at a particular time in history.²⁴

Whilst it is difficult to ascertain with any certainty the particular interests of the Mahāyāna authorial communities, Deleanu (1999: 78) notes that the background milieu seems to be:

... both ascetic and philosophical ... familiar with the doctrinal developments of traditional Buddhism but motivated ... by a different philosophical outlook which must have grown gradually from within the Buddhist *saṅgha* itself.

²⁴ One such belief appears to be societal attitudes regarding the spiritual endeavours of women. We see that in Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* women were considered inferior or limited in their spiritual accomplishments. Because of this, *avaivartīn* status was outside the purview of women generally, and only made possible if reborn in a male form.

Another attitude which appears prevalent amongst authorial communities of these texts is the quest for credibility. Promotional strategies abound. As well as espousing a more elevated path, the *Aṣṭa* implies that only those with total and steadfast commitment are suitable aspirants. An exclusivity is inferred. This is epitomized in the person of the *avaivartika* bodhisattva who does not falter in his resolve to cultivate the perfections (*pāramitās*) and *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom.

Deleanu (1999: 78-79) cites Bareau (1955: 301-304), who theorizes that ascetic communities doctrinally most likely started from a predominantly Mahāsāṅghika background. This, combined with meditative experiences, could have led to philosophical inferences and then to doctrinal development. However, there is no certainty as to the doctrinal affiliations of those who authored these texts, whether they belonged to traditions of Mahāsāṅghikas or its sub-sects: Ekavyāvahārika, Lokottaravāda and Kaukūlika or the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharmists. Harrison (1995: 56-57) makes the interesting point that some adherents of Vinaya lineages may have been followers of the Mahāyāna, who then altered Mahāyāna texts to fit the particular doctrinal context of their own Nikāya, even though they were composed in a different doctrinal milieu. Harrison illustrates this by giving the example of monks or nuns from a Sarvāstivādin or Dharmaguptaka ordination lineage, who when under sectarian pressure, might have changed a text composed in a Mahāsāṅghika affiliated environment.

Another area of debate centers around whether authorial communities were working independently in a segregated environment or working semi-independently within existing monastic establishments. Reginald Ray (1994), in his study maintains that groups formed independently, stating that the earliest Mahāyānists were communities of forest dwelling ascetics. This became known as the “forest hypothesis”

and according to Harrison (2003: 135) the new textual tradition could have been the literary residue of those ascetics' visionary experiences. However, Harrison goes on to assert that Mahāyāna *sūtras* are too diverse to be anything other than multi-origin in nature. So, whilst some texts might well have been authored by forest dwelling ascetics, others could have been produced within traditional monastic settings by monastics.²⁵ Silk (2002: 374-375) notes similar findings, claiming that authors of Mahāyāna texts were educated monks or communities of such monks and to become a monk the only way through was by means of an orthodox ordination lineage in the Vinaya tradition. Harrison (2003: 141) draws a distinction between two types of monks; the meditators (*vipaśyanadhura*) and the text-transmitters (*granthadhura*) but is unsure whether or how many of the written works of *granthadhuras* were preceded by their oral transmission counterparts. From an historical standpoint, the views outlined so far, cast doubt on whether Mahāyāna *sūtras* were the authentic words of the Buddha or were, to use Harrison's phraseology (2003: 142) "... a creative recasting of material already accepted as authentic *buddhavacana*." Another theory (Lopez 1995: 36) especially applicable to the *prajñānāparamitā sūtras*, maintains that textual production

²⁵ See Strauch 2018: 212. Supporting this view is the discovery of the Bajaur Mahāyāna *sūtra* manuscript, written first or second century CE, deposited amongst a collection of texts which included mainstream Buddhist texts. As the place of discovery – a cell in a ruined monastery in the Bajaur district of Pakistan, can be determined with a high degree of accuracy, we can infer that at least some of the followers of Mahāyāna did not live in separate institutions but in monasteries of traditional Buddhism.

was not initially dependent on human agency but revealed as a kind of timeless transcendence likened to the Vedic notion of existing as truth because of its ahistorical status. Other *sūtras* were said to be revealed by the Buddha himself to Mahāyānist meditators in a trance or dream.²⁶

Obviously, these theories, in particular the theory of “non-human agency” pose certain methodological difficulties. If one is working with a quasi-historical account of this literature, the issue of trying to establish a relative chronology for Mahāyāna textual production, as well as to its authenticity becomes problematic. Moreover, where and in what form were these *sūtras* stored and how and why at a particular point in time, were they retrieved and circulated? The orthodox Mahāyāna view that these teachings were given by the Buddha at the second turning of the Wheel of the dharma at Vulture Peak Mountain in Rājagṛha and then entrusted to the *nāga* spirits in some netherworld only to be gifted to or retrieved by Nāgārjuna at some later date, is a belief still espoused in some Tibetan Buddhist teaching precincts today.²⁷ Problems abound. First this theory requires the prior acceptance of certain Mahāyāna doctrines such as “Three turnings of the wheel of dharma” (*tridharmacakrapravartana*) and the “Three Bodies of the Buddha,” (*trikāya*) the *nirmāṇakāya* aspect being the body which

²⁶ See Harrison 1990: 33 fnt. 4 where he alludes to such a method of *sūtra* creation.

²⁷ See Harrison 2003: 124 for an account of this theory.

disseminated the *prajñāpāramitā* teaching on earth. Second, if we were to accept this rather legendary explanation that Nāgārjuna was the recipient/retriever of the *prajñāpāramitā* literature and if approximate dates for Nāgārjuna are ca. 150-250 CE,²⁸ how are we to explain the recent manuscript finds of parts of the *Aṣṭa* carbon dated to around 47 CE, suggesting a base source ca. 100 BC., a time before any approximated dates for Nāgārjuna? Here I note Harrison's cautionary remarks (1995: 51) about attempting to infer facts about historical reality directly from Mahāyāna *sūtras*, as if they were a direct reflection of the society in which they were produced. Obviously, they were not written as historical documents but as doctrinal treatises. But a more general problem becomes apparent; that of the supra mundane content of numerous Mahāyāna *sūtras*, where, in many instances, a hermeneutical approach based on even a semi-literal interpretation would be inadequate and inappropriate. How are we to read accounts of mythical beings such as *nāgas* and *yakṣas*, *rākṣasas*, *pretas*, *kaṭapūtanas*, the creatures who bestowed the gift to Nāgārjuna? Similarly, how if at all, can sociological/historical information be derived from such accounts? Are

²⁸For an overview of dates for Nāgārjuna see Mabbett 1998: 332-333. The date 150-250 CE. is the agreed date Japanese scholars use when situating Nāgārjuna. But for scholars such as Ian Mabbett and Walser (2005: 60ff.) there is no agreed chronology for Nāgārjuna, with dates usually ranging roughly between the first and third century CE.

we to infer that these mystical beings are an accepted part of the social reality, existing as the mythical fabric or legend of society at the time?

Considering the above, it is very unclear when, where and by whom the first Mahāyāna *sūtras* were composed. The first real written evidence we have of these as completed texts, and here we are concerned primarily with the *prajñāpāramitā* genre of texts, are the Chinese translations from the late second century on, beginning with Lokakṣema. As such, Lokakṣema's extant translations are the earliest dateable literary evidence of the Mahāyāna, bearing in mind that Mahāyāna reached China with several centuries of growth behind it.²⁹

As to the production and authorship of the earliest extant *prajñāpāramitā* text, the *Aṣṭa*, its origins have been the subject of much controversy.³⁰ Some scholars have claimed that it probably developed amongst authorial communities of the Mahāsāṅghikas in Southern India in the Andhra country. This hypothesis has been challenged by Lamotte (1954: 386 fnt. 49) who proposes that the North-West and Khotan are more likely the locale of its genesis.

²⁹ Harrison (1993: 142) poses tentative dates for the Indic versions of the *Aṣṭa* to be 100 BCE to 100 CE. based on the discovery near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border of a *prajñāpāramitā* manuscript fragment written in the Gāndhārī language in Kharoṣṭhī script and carbon dated roughly to 47-147 CE.

³⁰ See Conze 1978: 2ff. where he presents the various arguments for the possible origin of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*.

Lamotte's theory is strengthened by the recent manuscript finds of a *prajñāpāramitā* text near Bamiyan, carbon dated to the first century CE. What appears clear however, is that the ideas presented in the *Aṣṭa* appear to build on existing Abhidharma knowledge, extending it with concepts such as *sarvajña*, full omniscience, where the perfection of wisdom culminated in Buddhahood as a preferred final attainment, as opposed to *arhatship*.

We know very little about the authorial communities who produced the Sanskrit *Aṣṭa* manuscripts around the eleventh and twelfth centuries. A Sanskrit *prajñāpāramitā* text was first discovered by B. H. Hodgson in Nepal between 1830 and 1840 (Conze 1978: 29). Accretions are evident. Conze (1978: 8) asserts that the insertion of the Buddha Akṣobhya into later Sanskrit versions of the text reflects the popularity of the cult at this time and that the author, being a follower of the Akshobhya, would have inserted the references to him.

2.4.3 Intended and Received Audience

Some intended audiences at the time of writing these early Mahāyāna texts, would have included Mainstream followers. Adherants of these schools would most likely have contested the authenticity of this new Mahāyāna genre with its promotion of the *avaivartīn* Bodhisattva as superior to that of the path of an *arhat*. We see

anecdotal evidence of this in the *Aṣṭa*, where many passages³¹ present Māra persuading the *avaivartin* Bodhisattva to reject the Mahāyāna on the grounds that they were not the words of the Buddha. And so, any rejection of Mahāyāna *prajñāpāramitā* is portrayed as simply the beguiling work of Māra. In response to this anticipated skepticism, Harrison (1987: 80) notes that the textual output of these early Mahāyānists was extremely defensive with “...chapter after chapter proclaiming the merits of this doctrine or that practice causing texts to ... fairly groan under the weight of their own self-glorification.”

Gilks (2010: xii) claims that amongst reader/receivers of the *Aṣṭa*, there “... were at least some ... who identified themselves as bodhisattvas, who saw the irreversible bodhisattva as an ideal to be emulated.” Other early Mahāyānists, including many common lay folk, simply venerated the Bodhisattva and aspired to attain this ideal for themselves (Harrison 1987: 86). The tale in the *Aṣṭa* of Gaṇḡā upāsikā, a woman lay follower who “crossed over,” demonstrates this aspect that ordinary people could enter the Bodhisattva path. However, Gaṇḡā is also symbolic of the trope which espouses that a female form is not a suitable receptacle in which to attain *avaivartin* status. Of note also is the inclusion in the final chapter of the *Aṣṭa*, of the Buddha’s instructions to Ananda, to teach the *prajñāpāramitā* to all beings aspiring to become

³¹ These passages are scattered throughout the *Aṣṭa*. T224: 454c29-455b02 is an example of one such passage.

bodhisattvas, suggesting a potential wider interest beyond that of an exclusive bodhisattva audience. However, the *Ugraparipṛcchā* (*Ugra*), a text contemporary with the *Aṣṭa*, presents a somewhat different viewpoint of early Mahāyāna reader audience. It appears to be written solely for those who considered themselves bodhisattvas. According to Nattier (2003: 75), “The *Ugra* was evidently intended for an audience consisting exclusively of bodhisattvas, for it never addresses non-bodhisattvas (whether lay or monastic) directly.”

More generally, considering the received audience of these texts, their transmission in China through the early Chinese translators, in particular Lokakṣema, leads us to the reasonable assumption that not only had this translator sympathies with doctrinal ideas of Mahāyāna thinking (Nattier 2008: 75) but had anticipated an audience for such ideas. Because all of the *sūtras* credited to Lokakṣema belonged to the Mahāyāna genre, scholars have acknowledged this translator as particularly influential in exposing Mahāyāna thought in China during the Eastern Han period, 206 BC – 220 CE. Harrison (1993: 138), citing the linguistic study of Zürcher, states that whilst it would be risky to attempt to draw firm conclusions concerning the received response of Han Buddhists on the basis of the doctrinal content of these *prajñāpāramitā* texts, there would have been interest for this genre type in China at that time.

3. Early Mahāyāna *sūtras*

3.1 “Early” period

For the purpose of this study, “early” as in “early Mahāyāna *sūtras*” will focus primarily on the period between the first century BCE³² and the fifth century CE., a period which bears witness to the first Chinese translations of *prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. Texts which appeared in this period and which I reference as early are the second century *Aṣṭa Prajñāpāramitā* of Lokakṣema (T224) my foremost resource and various Mahāyāna *sūtras* which appeared roughly contemporaneously with the *Aṣṭa* such as the *Mahaprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* (MPPŚ), *Daśabhūmika-sūtra* (*Daśa*), the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthita Samādhi-sūtra* (*PraS*), and the *Śūraṅgama-Samādhi-sūtra* (*Śgs*). Where I refer to the Sanskrit versions of the *Aṣṭa*, a later period of Mahāyāna systemization extending well into the Pāla period, I will note their later chronologies accordingly. I take the fifth century as the *terminus ante quem* of the designated early period as it coincides with the emergence of Mahāyāna as a clearly

³² Although the first witness we have of a complete Mahāyāna text appeared end second century CE., with Lokakṣema’s *Aṣṭa*, the Indic source text for this and others in this earliest Chinese translation period could have been produced as early as first century BCE. Early manuscript fragment finds (section 2.3.2 fn. 20) supports this theory.

identifiable group having its own monasteries.³³ In order to avoid confusion, it should be noted that scholars have used “early” to reference different time frames relevant to different undertakings. For example, Lancaster (1975: 35) references *Aṣṭa* recensions T224, T225 and T226 as constituting the early period as he sees this period as representing the early or first translation tradition. Harrison (1995: 56) uses early to denote Indic source texts. Although no longer extant, these texts would have formed the earliest Mahāyāna period, and would have served as source material for the later Chinese translations. By this reasoning, Harrison sees the first Chinese translation period, end second century CE., as the early-middle period because doctrinally, “...Mahāyāna had already been in existence for several centuries.” In line with my designated time frame for “early,” Deleanu (1999: 66) describes the early phase of Mahāyāna and its textual production as extending up to the fifth century CE., after which time Mahāyāna appears as a more consolidated movement with a greater awareness of itself as a distinct institution.³⁴ Gilks (2017: 300) agrees, although expresses this in a somewhat paradoxical manner, stating that:

³³ See Schopen 1979, for the history of early epigraphy which could provide evidence for the emergence of an institutionalized Mahāyāna.

³⁴ Drews (2009: 67) however claims that early Mahāyāna (no time frame given) was nothing more than a textual movement within existing institutional structures.

The end of early Mahāyāna may also be thought of as the beginning Mahāyāna, for it marks the time when, instead of seeing themselves as bodhisattvas, its adherents may have for the first time begun to think of themselves primarily as Mahāyānists.

With this qualification, Gilks is also expressing the idea of early as the period which precedes the “beginning of Mahāyāna” as a self-conscious movement.³⁵ Hence, it can be seen that seizing solely on the descriptor “early” even though relating to Mahāyāna textual sources, without due consideration to the particular context in which it arises, together with evidence for its use, can be misleading.

3.2 Mahāyāna *sūtras*

Whilst much scholarly work has been done on the possible origins of Mahāyāna³⁶ and on establishing chronologies for its arising, Mahāyāna in the context of this study

³⁵ Although not explicitly stated by Gilks, it is reasonable to assume that he uses a designation of “early” for texts constituting a pre-institutionalised period. However, it is difficult to determine up to what point in time Mahāyāna could be considered pre-institutional and it is equally unclear as to how Mahāyāna subsequently manifested as a distinct “movement.”

³⁶ For theories prior to 1980 see: La Vallée Poussin, 1910 who sees Mahāyāna as a reaction to a perceived selfish goal of liberation for oneself, Dayal, 1932 and Lamotte, 1958 who see Mahāyāna as a movement to accommodate the needs of laypeople, Hirakawa, 1963 — a movement initiated by lay people, Conze, 1951 — a movement which had its roots in a factional division by the Mahasāṃghika sect. See also

of *avaivartika*, will focus primarily on its expression in its formative years. In this period, we know it through its earliest extant literature, generally designated by scholars as “Mahāyāna *sūtras*.” I will further comment on usages of this term as it appears in subsequent recensions of the *Aṣṭa* and other so-called Mahāyāna texts relevant to this study.

Before beginning, some clarification of the term “Mahāyāna” as designated for a new type of text appearing early in the Common Era is necessary. Fronsdal (1998: 42-43) summarizes some of the difficulties surrounding the label Mahāyāna³⁷ often used loosely by modern scholars to describe these early bodhisattva *sūtras*, where in fact its usage “... has implied a relationship between texts, institutions and doctrines within Indian Buddhism.” Fronsdal illustrates this point by citing examples where the term Mahāyāna, when not used judiciously, can mean the “first radical expression” of a new doctrine as presented in the *Aṣṭa*, or refer to the *Aṣṭa*’s pivotal role in underpinning the Mādhyamika philosophical school, in which sense Mahāyāna represents a

Harrison, 1995 who, after reviewing the available literature on the subject, concludes that its beginnings were multi-faceted in nature developing within existing institutions. Gilks (2017) notes that rather than speak of origins of early Mahāyāna, it is more expedient to look for contributing or favorable conditions in which such a movement might have arisen.

³⁷ Fronsdal (1998: 41) asserts that, “... the term Mahāyāna has been adopted by modern Buddhist scholarship to delimit a historical category which is inappropriate for describing developments in Buddhist India during the first two or three centuries of the Common Era.” This is largely because new ideas, practices and doctrines were largely developed within existing Nikāyas.

tradition. My intent is to use the term Mahāyāna *sūtra*³⁸ initially for some fragmentary textual finds appearing first century BCE.³⁹ but primarily for texts appearing during the Chinese translation period, late second century CE. on. These texts presented doctrinal themes previously unattested, some of which came to be known as the *prajñāpāramitā* genre of texts. As people producing/receiving these texts gained greater self-awareness and separated from Mainstream schools, the term Mahāyāna is used to denote a movement which gradually became institutionalized and where doctrines became systematized. However, the term Mahāyāna as used in this later milieu, will be noted as such.

The term Mahāyāna as a descriptor of a text type, a “Mahāyāna *sūtra*,” seems to have appeared only at a later stage, some centuries after its composition. Drewes (2021: 38) states that these *sūtras* were initially known simply as “extensive” (*vaipulya/vaidalya/vaitulya*) or “profound” (*gambhīra*) *sūtras*.⁴⁰ Fronsdal (1998: 65-

³⁸ I use the term “Mahāyāna *sūtra*” in the way that it is often used in modern scholarship; that is, to describe historical textual sources appearing in the aforementioned early period, bearing in mind all the caveats attached to this label. It is hoped that most readers will understand the term as appropriate to context and with this consideration, pragmatism is favoured over unnecessary scholarly pedantry.

³⁹ For further information on fragmentary remains of Indic source texts see Falk and Karashima 2012, a study of a first-century *prajñāpāramitā* manuscript from Gandhāra. See also Allon and Salomon 2010: 1-22, for research pertaining to Mahāyāna manuscript fragment finds from Gandhāra and the initial composition of Mahāyāna texts.

⁴⁰ Drewes (2019: 15) states that Mahāyāna *sūtras* were first distinguished from other genre *sūtra* types by Burnouf in his work, *Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien*, where he referred to them as

67) using Hōbōgirin's index of Chinese Buddhist texts,⁴¹ notes that it was not until the fourth century CE. that "Mahāyāna" (or some equivalent form of "great vehicle") appeared in the title of a Chinese text,⁴² and not until the sixth century that it appeared with some frequency.

As a further point of clarification, the fact that the term "Mahāyāna" appears in the body of some of these early texts, does not mean it is used as a term of identity for these texts. It merely encourages us to look more closely at its possible meaning in these contexts. By way of illustrating this point, "Mahāyāna" transliterated by Lokakṣema as *moheyan* in the *Aṣṭa*, occurs in three passages,⁴³ twelve instances appearing in the passage T224: 427b29-428a16,⁴⁴ part of which is as follows:

Subhūti said to the Buddha: The mahāyāna, passes from the heaven
above to the heavens below, into the world of man. It has no equal, this

mahāvaiṣṭava as well as Mahāyāna *sūtras*. In his study he differentiated them primarily from *avadānas* (Buddhist narrative stories often with moralist overtures).

⁴¹ Referenced by Fronsdaal as *Répertoire du Canon Bouddhique Sino-Japonais (Fascicule Annexe du Hōbōgirin)*; Tokyo: Maison Franco-Japonaise, 1978).

⁴² Fronsdaal (1998: 77) notes that according to *Hōbōgirin's index*, no Indian *sūtras* contained Mahāyāna in their titles. It was only found in later Sanskrit philosophical treatises.

⁴³ See Giddings 2010. "Mahāyāna" appears a total of fourteen times in the following three passages: T224: 427c02, 429b07 and 446b21.

⁴⁴ When citing passages from Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) I am using Giddings's 2010 English translation titled, *The Sūtra on the Path and the Pursuit of Prajñāpāramitā*, unless otherwise stated.

yāna is like the sky. Just as the sky covers countless asaṃkhyeyas of people, the mahāyāna also contains countless asaṃkhyeyas of people. For this reason, it is called mahāyāna. This mahāyāna is at no time seen coming nor any time seen going. (T224: 428a06-10)

Here the ensuing discussion between Subhūti, Pūrṇamaitrāyanipūtra (henceforth Pūrṇa) and the Buddha suggests that this *yāna* is great because, like boundless space, it has the capacity to be filled with countless, immeasurable beings. This excerpt continues by noting that all aspects of Mahāyāna, all notions related to a dharma, such as its coming and going, are qualified by a negation of their real and enduring existence, a theme which appears inextricably linked to Mahāyāna at this juncture of the text and at this point in time. Fronsdal (1998: 48) notes that:

The most frequent occurrence of Mahāyāna in Lokakṣema's corpus is the phrase *mahāyāna-samprasthita* (setting out on the Great Way)⁴⁵ a technical or formulaic expression found in many bodhisattva sūtras.

⁴⁵ Fronsdal (1998: 53) believes that this expression "... is probably synonymous with being on the bodhisattva path."

Other than this, the meaning of the term at this stage of textual development remains somewhat illusive.⁴⁶

The term Mahāyāna also appears in the *PraS* (T418) and in An Xuan's translation of the *Ugra* (T322), texts contemporary with the *Aṣṭa* (T224). Some centuries later, the term appeared in the recorded travels of Chinese pilgrims,⁴⁷ with epigraphic evidence for Mahāyāna appearing around the fifth century. (Schopen 1979: 1-19)

As previously stated, the earliest known Mahāyāna texts appear to present a genre tailored particularly for bodhisattvas, and hence the designation of "Bodhisattva texts" or "Bodhisattva *sūtras*" is thought to be more appropriate by scholars such as Nattier (2003) and Fronsdal (1998). Fronsdal (1998: 41) however cautions that such a label could also be misleading in that not all of these *sūtras* presented predominantly

⁴⁶ Fronsdal (1998: 50) notes that there is nothing to suggest that Mahāyāna has any institutional or sectarian connotations at this stage of its use in the *Aṣṭa*, pointing out that it was not consolidated as such until around seventh century CE.

⁴⁷ Silk (2002: 360) states that Chinese pilgrims, Faxian, mid-late fourth century, Xuanzang, 602-664 CE. and Yijing, 635-637 CE. differentiated the types of texts found in monastic institutions. Yijing, in his *Record of Buddhist Practices*, p. 691 clearly defines Mahāyāna as "Those who worship the Bodhisattvas and read the Mahāyāna *sūtras* are called Mahāyānists, while those who do not are called Hīnayānists." Silk (2002: 361), in referring to a study by Barth (1898: 448), concludes that, "... there were Mahāyānists and Hīnayānists in all or in almost all the schools." Reports such as these lead Gilks (2017: 293) to draw the conclusion that "... for the first 500 years or so of its existence, Mahāyāna was a minority movement within or at the fringes of various mainstream monastic institutions." However, all that can really be said is that strongly defined ideas of Mahāyāna especially in relation to Mainstream schools/doctrines, appears unclear at this early stage.

bodhisattva themes. For example, some texts such as the *Akṣobhya-vyūha-sūtra* (*AkṣV*) promotes worship of Akṣobhya Buddha as a means of securing rebirth in his pure realm. Given this, Fronsdal concludes that in the formative years of Mahāyāna there was no clear doctrine or set of doctrines which could be exclusively labelled as Mahāyāna.⁴⁸

Bearing in mind these comments, I will argue that if not all, many of the early Mahāyāna texts did indeed present a type of genre⁴⁹ not previously attested. Taking this perspective, I will now explore what doctrinal themes could be considered developed, divergent, or innovative.⁵⁰ Foremost was the doctrine of the superior state of Buddhahood, a state which provided an alternative soteriological option to that of an *arhat*. It is conjectured that this doctrinal position drew momentum from the *Jātakas*, tales about the Buddha's former lives as a bodhisattva, in which he attained awakening as a result of great meritorious deeds accumulated over many lifetimes and that these were the stories which provided the blueprint for the state of Buddhahood

⁴⁸ On this point of doctrinal differentiation, Harrison (2003: 118) elaborates that for a large part, Mahāyāna doctrines had a basis in Mainstream practices such as the *smṛtyupasthānas*, the *dhyānas*, the *anusmṛtīs* and the *brahma-vīharas*.

⁴⁹ One genre to emerge became known as the *prajñāpāramitā* genre of texts as it presented predominantly "wisdom of emptiness" themes.

⁵⁰ In this brief exposé of Mahāyāna, mention is made only of the major doctrinal expansions/differing characteristics. Drewes (2009: 66-67) notes also the inclusion, in these early texts, of expanded cosmologies and mythical histories, merit accumulating practices such as listening, memorizing, copying and worshipping *sūtras*, as well as rejoicing (*anumodanā*) in the good deeds of others.

encountered in these early texts. Achieving Buddhahood was to achieve the state of omniscience (*sarvajña*), the knowledge of all phenomena. This state of *sarvajña* is achieved through realization of no independent existence (*asvabhāva*) of all elements (dharmas).⁵¹ The realization of emptiness of all phenomena, not only the selflessness of persons as outlined in the Mainstream canon,⁵² features prominently in the samādhis of the Mahāyāna corpus. (Skilton 2002: 56)

Another doctrinal development is a samādhi practice dealing with Pure Land themes, extensively expounded in the *PraS*⁵³ but also found in the *Aṣṭa*.⁵⁴ As presented in the *PraS*, (translated by Harrison as “Concentration of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present”) this type of samādhi requires prolonged visualization of a Buddha. In this case Amitābha is envisaged in his Buddha-field Sukhāvatī, until a vision of that Buddha manifests. To realize this samādhi is to achieve entrance to his Buddha-field where a practitioner continually receives dharma

⁵¹ Deleanu (1999: 69) speaks of the ultimate state in terms of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), signlessness (*ānimitta*), and directionless (*apraṇihita*). See Deleanu, endnote 23 for research regarding an explanation of these states.

⁵² The four meditative absorptions (*dhyāna*) constitute the primary referent for the term samādhi on the *śrāvaka* path, whereby the selflessness of persons (*anattā*) is realized.

⁵³ See Lokakṣema's translation, colophon 179 CE, the *Banzhou-sanmei-jing* (T418) in three volumes (*juan*). The base Sanskrit text is no longer extant except for a small fragment. See Harrison 1998: 4-5 and Harrison, Lenz and Salomon 2018.

⁵⁴ Harrison (1998: 2) claims that this samādhi is a developed form of the Mainstream stream practice, *buddhānusmṛti* (Calling the Buddha to Mind).

teachings. Harrison (1998: 3) argues that the *PraS* distinguishes itself from other Pure Land treatises in that at all times this samādhi experience is coupled with the injunction of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), thereby aligning itself with Mahāyāna *prajñāpāramitā* textual wisdom. Harrison (1978: 48) referring to passages from the *PraS*⁵⁵ notes:

The *Pratyutpanna-Sūtra* repeatedly inveighs against this false notion of a substance, or of an objectively existing entity (*bhava-saṃjñā*), that is something which could “come or go,” counselling instead the cultivation of the notion of empty space (*ākāśa-saṃjñā*) with regard to the Tathāgatas seen in samādhi.

The *Aṣṭa* as preserved by Lokakṣema, whilst omitting any reference to a specific Pure Land Buddha, does include the “Samādhi of the Vision of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions,” (T224: 472a18-24) as it appears in Sadāprarudita’s retelling of his dream. In this dream, the Buddhas of the ten directions draw a link to the doctrine of *prajñāpāramitā* and to the realization of *sarvajñā*. The second reference⁵⁶ to Sadāprarudita finding samādhi, stated as the “sixty-thousand samādhi gates,” (T224: 473c26ff.) occurs after a long exposition by Dharmodgata concerning the qualities of a

⁵⁵ See Harrison’s English translation of the *PraS*, 1998: 36-38.

⁵⁶ See Harrison 1978: 48. The later Sanskrit versions of the *Aṣṭa* have a long list of samādhis.

Buddha, where these attributes are underpinned by the rhetoric of emptiness. A long explanation of these samādhi gates follows, listing many instances of how this samādhi manifests as indicators of a Buddha's awakened experience, instances which appear as spontaneous images in the mind of a bodhisattva. Giddings (2014: 192) concludes that in Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa*, the predominant function of these many samādhis, is to infuse the text with the idea of a "...progressing bodhisattva's changing experience of the world [as it] ⁵⁷ becomes more akin to that of a buddha."

This highlights the difference between the singular notion of samādhi in the Mainstream traditions directed to the realization of an *arhat*, compared to the many named samādhis characteristic of early Mahāyāna *sūtras* experienced by one on the bodhisattva path. Skilton (2002: 61), referring specifically to the *Samādhirāja-sūtra*, elaborates on these many faceted samādhis, saying they are "cognitive in scope" rather than denoting a fixed state of mind on a single conceptual referent.

Furthermore, samādhi in the *Aṣṭa* and other pure land treatises, are underpinned by the notion of myriad Buddhas existing simultaneously, to be glimpsed in the present through a particular samādhi practice. Included in this array are two of the more prominent Buddhas, Akṣobhya in the East, and Amitābha in the West, complete with their respective Buddha fields, a place where one could be born as reward for

⁵⁷ Parenthesis brackets are my addition.

meritorious deeds and through meditative practices directed to them. But as Harrison (1987: 86) notes, these practices aimed at “celestial adoration” were most likely a later development.

Another important doctrinal point presented in early Mahāyāna literature was the notion of “skill in means” (*upāyakaūśalya*) where, in this early stage, it was understood as skillful techniques to be utilized by bodhisattvas in both meditation practice and the transference of merit.⁵⁸ Nattier (2003: 155) clarifies this notion by stating that in the *Aṣṭa* “skillful” meant:

... the ability to practice states of deep meditative absorption whilst staving off what would be their natural karmic result: rebirth in one of the rūpa-dhātu heavens, or worse, the attainment of enlightenment as an Arhat.

Gilks (2017: 300) reiterates:

⁵⁸ See section 7.1, p. 149ff. of this study for additional information on *upāyakaūśalya*.

Through skill-in-means a bodhisattva could undertake all the practices that cut the bonds to cyclic existence without entering nirvana or accidentally attaining the lesser goal of Arhatship.

The presentation of *upāyakaśālyā* in these early texts such as the *Aṣṭa* (T224) appears to have markedly different connotations when compared to later developments of the concept. As recensions expanded so did the meaning of the term where it took on more of a transactional relationship. It was thought that one processing this quality was skillful in teaching the dharma to others in accordance with their uniquely receptive dispositions. Lancaster (1968: 45-57) illustrates this development in tabulated form (Table 1), to show how *upāyakaśālyā* as a concept appearing in T224 was increasingly referenced in the accreted Sanskrit versions of the *Aṣṭa*. Drawing on the work of Hikata (1958), he observed that whilst *upāyakaśālyā* was mentioned in the early versions of the *Aṣṭa* (T224, T225, T226), because it was not developed as a doctrine, he suggests it was of lesser importance in early Mahāyāna thinking.⁵⁹

Of particular interest is that the *Aṣṭa*, in its earliest translation phase (T224, T225, T226), makes no mention of the *dharma-kāya*, a concept which appears, together with

⁵⁹ See Lancaster 1968: 36-42 for a detailed analysis of the development of *upāyakaśālyā* in the later accreted versions of the *Aṣṭa*.

rūpa-kāya, in later *prajñāpāramitā* recensions. At this early stage of Mahāyāna, as attested in the textual tradition, there exists the notion of only one Buddha Body. This Body is to be perfected by bodhisattvas through samādhi conjoined with emptiness and by means of eons of meritorious deeds. The latter, meritorious deeds, is a notion which Lancaster (1975: 36-38) argues is not dissimilar to the underlying rationale behind the heroic deeds of former Buddhas/bodhisattvas as recorded in the *Jātakas*.

Another common theme in the *Aṣṭa* and other early Mahāyāna *sūtras* is reference to bodhisattvas having been predicted, who then receive irreversible status. Drewes (2021: 55) notes that in these early *sūtras*,

...one can only enter the path to Buddhahood in the presence of a living Buddha, and one only becomes a true bodhisattva, assured of one day attaining Buddhahood, when a living Buddha gives one a prediction that this will take place.

This idea appears in the well-known story of Śākyamuni Buddha who, in a former life, received a prediction of his future awakening by Dipaṃkara Buddha. But, as prediction constitutes a subsidiary topic of investigation in this thesis, further elaboration at this stage will not be made.

3.2.1 *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Parajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Aṣṭa*)

i. Versions of the *Aṣṭa*.

It is clear from recent manuscript fragment finds, that the earliest extant *Aṣṭa* was a Gāndhārī version in Kharoṣṭhī script dating from between 47-147 CE. (with an 81.1% probability based on a C14 test).⁶⁰ A further partial Kuṣāṇa Sanskrit manuscript of the *Aṣṭa* in Brāhmī script, was found in the Bamiyan region, dating from around the second century CE.⁶¹ Additional fragments from Turfan, Kizil and Dunhuang in western China have been studied by Karashima (2011).⁶² Walser (2018: 129) gives detailed information of six other manuscripts of the *Aṣṭa*, five in Sanskrit and one a Bengali transcript of a Nepali original. These manuscripts are housed in a repository in Nepal, the oldest bearing the date of 1061 CE. These six manuscripts were used and edited into what is now the standard edition of the text by Rajendralal Mitra in 1888.

Karashima (2011: ix, 2013: 172) notes the following regarding the transmission of the *Aṣṭa*. The earliest datable Chinese translation of the *Aṣṭa* is that by Lokakṣema, the

⁶⁰ See Falk/Karashima 2013: 97-169.

⁶¹ See Sander 2000: 1-51.

⁶² See Karashima 2011: vii for information surrounding the Dunhuang, Turfan and Kizil manuscript finds. In his critical analysis, manuscript finds in these areas are incorporated and presented as a comparative study against Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa*.

Daoxing Banruo jing,⁶³ (T224) which has a colophon that dates it to 179 CE. This recension is based on a Gāndhārī manuscript, and preserved in two other Chinese translations,⁶⁴ the *Da Mingdu jing* (T225) by Zhi Qian⁶⁵ fl. ca. 220-257CE., and the *Mohebanre chao jing* (T226), by Zhu Fonian (Darmapriya) in 382 CE. Kumārajīva's fourth version, the *Mohebanreboluomi chao jing* or *Xiaopin Banreboluomi jing* (T227), dated 408 CE. follows. Xuanzang then produced two "assemblages" of the *Aṣṭa* during the years 660-663 CE. (T220 pp. 763-865) and (T220 pp. 865-920), the *Da Banruoboluomiduo jing*.⁶⁶ These constitute the fifth and sixth versions. The final Chinese version was translated in 982-984? CE. by Shihu or Dānapāla, the *Fomushusheng Sanfazang Banruoboluomiduo jing* (T228). These seven Chinese

⁶³ Literally translated as "The *Sūtra* of the Practice of the Way," but also loosely referred to by its later designation, "*Prajñāpāramitā* in 8000 Lines." Technically, this later designation is an incorrect rendering of Lokakṣema's original title in Chinese. In this study I use the title *Aṣṭasahasrika*, (*Aṣṭa*) the Sanskrit equivalent of "*Prajñāpāramitā* in 8000 Lines," but for added clarity and to identify the designated version, I couple it with the text's authorship and/or its Taishō numerical designation, thereby utilizing a referential system widely used by scholars and recognized by a reading audience.

⁶⁴ Karashima (2013: 173) notes that the *Mohebanre chao jing* (T226), translated by Zhi Qian and Zhu Fonian, are modified versions of Lokakṣema's translation, essentially a revision of only thirteen chapters (Karashima, 2011: ix) where old vernacular words and expressions are replaced.

⁶⁵ Karashima (2011: ix) notes that because both vocabulary and style in the first chapter differ markedly from the remaining work, this chapter is not the work of Zhi Qian but an anonymous author.

⁶⁶ Research by Bongard-Levin and Watanabe (1997: 98) appears to support the view that Xuanzang's translation is not a product of selection and editing, suggesting a non-Chinese origin source text. More detailed information regarding the Indic base text of the *Da Banreboluomiduo jing* is found in the catalogue (section four on *prajñāpāramitā*) at end of *Fayuan zhulin*. See Brill Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. (2015: 14)

translations range from the second to the tenth centuries and together with the Sanskrit texts⁶⁷ and the Tibetan (Kanjur) translation⁶⁸ are divided by Karashima (2011: xii) into four loose groupings based primarily on chronology. Karashima (2011: xii) calls attention to the fact that the use of the term “translation” does not signify that there was one base text from which the Chinese and Tibetan translations were made at different times. By comparing all extant *Aṣṭa* textual materials, he concludes that there must have been different original Indic source texts, which reflect certain stages of change, often growth, in the text. This appears to need clarification. At what stage of change does a text become an independent textual production, an “original” Indic text? Karashima attempts to reconcile this quandary by using the term “versions” in preference to “translations,” where “versions” is not clearly differentiated from his assertion of an original text. In the service of clarity, words like “original,” “source,” “base,” and similar terms, are best used in an explanatory context and then with due caution.

⁶⁷ Deleanu (1999: 67), relying on Kajiyama’s 1974 study, states that the extant Sanskrit manuscripts of the *Aṣṭa* appear to “... reflect the redactional development of the text between approximately 645 CE. (Xuangzang’s return to China) and 800 CE. (the probable date of Haribhadra’s compilation of his Commentary).”

⁶⁸ See Conze 1958: 4 who lists five successive redaction dates for the Tibetan translation of the Kanjur edition of the text, *Phags pa shes rab kyi pha rol tu phyin pa brgyad stong pa*.

ii. *Aṣṭa* as a text of *Prajñāpāramitā* genre.

As stated previously, the *Aṣṭa* and its various versions in Chinese, Sanskrit and Tibetan, form a sub-group of the *prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) genre of texts. Texts of this genre were classified⁶⁹ and later named according to the number of metrical lines⁷⁰ or *ślokas* the text contained. The main versions acknowledged according to this taxonomical system were the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (*Aṣṭa*) *Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 lines*, the *Aṣṭādaśasāhasrika* (*Aṣṭādaśa*)⁷¹ in 18 000 lines, the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* (*Pañca*) in 25 000 lines and the *Śatasāhasrika* (*Śata*) in 100 000 lines. As with the *Aṣṭa*, each quantitative title is compounded with *prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom). However, as Karashima (2015: 116) notes, these titles did not originally include the word *sūtra*. Additionally, there are compressed versions such as the *Heart sūtra*, with little more than 300 lines (Xuanzang's Chinese version) and the extremely condensed version, the *Perfection of Insight in One Syllable*.⁷²

⁶⁹ See Funayama 2006: 48-49. We have evidence of one such *prajñāpāramitā* text — *The Diamond Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, being first attested as this genre type (*bore-prajñā*, *boluomi-paramita-perfection*) in the *Jingang xianlun* (T1512 XXV 798a2-14), a record of a lecture by sixth century Chinese translator Bodhiruci.

⁷⁰ A metrical unit consisting of four *pādas* (feet) of eight syllables each, making thirty-two syllables in total.

⁷¹ I use Karashima's abbreviation (2011: xxv) in this instance.

⁷² Conze (1978: 13-16) notes that the contraction of *prajñāpāramitā* texts from seventh century onward coincided with the incorporation of some Tantric elements. These include the inclusion of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and the final mantra in the *Heart sūtra*.

How these texts relate to each other is a subject of great complexity and much previous study and debate. As well as outlining a linear, chronological schema, two typologies of classification, quantitative (size) and qualitative (recension based on doctrinal affiliation) have been used by scholars to determine how these texts were affiliated.

Conze (1958: 4) concludes that the later *prajñāpāramitā* texts grew out of the *Aṣṭa* stating:

The first was that in 8,000 lines, or rather its precursor. This was then expanded into 10,000, 18,000, 25,000 and 100,000 slokas; and after that it was contracted to 2,500, 700, 300⁷³ (The Diamond Sutra), 150, 25 (The Heart Sutra), and finally into one syllable (“A”).

Nattier (2003: fnt.19) likens this expansion to “... the *Aṣṭa* being sliced like a loaf of bread and then layered with filling introduced from other sources.” However, Nattier does not rule out the possibility that at least some of the Perfection of Wisdom texts subsequent to the *Aṣṭa* could have had their own independent beginnings. On the

⁷³ In this instance Conze (and in 1973: 122) categorizes the 300-line *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* as the *Diamond sūtra* text whilst most scholars including Nattier (1992) place the 300-line by Xuanzang as a version of the *Heart sūtra*.

basis of a detailed philological study, Nattier (1992: 153-224) theorizes that the main passage of the *Heart sūtra* not only originated in China but was extracted from Kumārajīva's version of the Larger *Prajñāpāramitā* (T223) and then back-translated into Sanskrit.

Conze (1978: 10) asserts that the larger *prajñāpāramitā* texts in 100 000, 25 000 and 18 000 lines are very close, differing only in regard to the length repetitive formulas are enumerated. According to Conze, from this perspective, the *Prajñāpāramitā* in 100 000 lines is the result of a full activation of all lists. Choong (2006: 5-6) goes only so far as to say that the versions from Kumārajīva onward have been influenced by the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* (*Pañca*) Perfection of Wisdom in 25 000 lines.⁷⁴

As well as quantitative expansions due in large to inflation of lists, larger *prajñāpāramitā* texts came to contain qualitative differences where doctrinal developments resulted in accreted recensions. One notable example is the doctrine of skill-in-means (*upāyakauśalya*), as previously discussed, which, in the larger texts, extended its former meaning to encompass a bodhisattva's teaching actions skillfully adjusted to the particular needs of other beings.

iii. Textual stratification.

⁷⁴ According to Kajiyoshi (1980: 112-114), the *Pañca* developed not as an enlargement of the *Aṣṭa* but as a commentary (*upadeśa*), attempting to solve particular doctrinal points which the *Aṣṭa* presented.

The *Aṣṭa*, like many other *sūtras*,⁷⁵ contains passages that were added or altered after the initial composition of the text so that, over time, textual stratification is evident. Conze, Lancaster, Harrison and more recently Karashima, through comparative studies of parallel texts, have documented these textual layers and noted emendations and accretions.

The verse compilation of the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* (*Rgs*), appears to belong to the earliest strata of *prajñāpāramitā* literature possibly going back to 100 BCE. Deleanu (1999: 67) and Conze (1973: x) consider the forty-one verses of the first two chapters of the *Rgs*⁷⁶ to be the original nucleus out of which the *Aṣṭa* text evolved, whilst Kajiyoshi (1980) believes the first chapter verses only, represent the core text. However, Yuyama (1970: vi-vii) in his extensive study of the *Rgs*, questions its status as progenitor of the *Aṣṭa*, stating that it is uncertain whether the *Rgs* or sections of it came before, were part of or followed the *Aṣṭa* or how it might have existed in some combination of the above.

Without doing a precise word for word comparison of early to later parallel versions, Conze (1973: xvi) shows in category form, how these accretions and

⁷⁵ Conze (1967: 168) mentions the *Mahāvastu*, *Lalitavistara*, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* and the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa* as examples of *sūtras* which were slowly built up over time.

⁷⁶ See Conze 1967: 169. The *Rgs* is a collection of 302 *gāthās* in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. The original text no longer survives; the extant text we have has been arranged by Haribhadra (ca. 800 CE.) in his commentary *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (*Aloka*). Conze (1973: x- xii) compares the *Rgs* with the *Aṣṭa* noting where concordance occurs in both texts.

emendations reveal themselves in the later versions of the *Aṣṭa*. Leaving aside the story of Sadāprarūdita,⁷⁷ he lists the following:

1. Increasing sectarianism.⁷⁸
2. The insertion of longer and longer Abhidharma lists.
3. Increasing mention and importance of skill in means (*upāyakaūśalya*) and related topics.⁷⁹
4. Inclusion of celestial buddhas and their realms (*kṣetras*).⁸⁰
5. Tendency toward verbosity, repetitiveness and overelaboration.
6. Lamentation over the decline of the Dharma.
7. Exposition of hidden meanings.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Karashima (2013: 182) notes that the Sadāprarūdita story in the Lokakṣema and Zhi Qian translations contain greater detail than later versions and culminates with a prediction (531) of Buddhahood on Sadāprarūdita by the Buddhas of the ten directions. Conze (1952: 252, 1973: xvi, 1978: 8) however, believes the Sadāprarūdita story to be quite a late addition to the text.

⁷⁸ This point needs further clarification by Conze. Does he mean evidence of a greater movement toward separation/institutionalism? And how does this lead to accretions in the text?

⁷⁹ Another example is the appearance of the concept of *bhūta-koti* (lit. reality limit), meaning a bodhisattva can postpone his entrance to Nirvana in order to work for living beings. This concept occurs eleven times in the Sanskrit text but only once in T224.

⁸⁰ Conze (1978: 8) sees this as a later insertion as “faith based” as opposed to the predominantly “philosophically based” doctrine, noting that in this context, dogmatic affirmations are loosely regarded as constituting philosophy in the earlier versions of the *Aṣṭa*.

⁸¹ Conze (1967: 142) gives an example of what could be construed as a “hidden meaning.” By extending the term “dharma” as used in the context of a simile, to include a metaphysical aspect, he illustrates its possible deeper meaning.

8. An increasing detailed development of a bodhisattva's career, systematized as graded stages (*bhūmi*).

Karashima (2013: 15) adds a further feature in that over time these texts show an increasing importance of the:

... superiority of worship of the prajñāpāramitā scriptures over that of Buddha images, which was thus deleted in later versions, resulting in the story's contents becoming more abstract and philosophical.

Lancaster (1968) compared Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* to all extant Sanskrit versions and concluded that all chapters were present in the T224 text and that accretions in later versions were evident only interlineally within chapters. These could have been added as explanations, repetitions or scribal corrections/errors.

v. Lokakṣema's translation of the *Aṣṭa*.

In his historical survey, Zürcher (1959: 35) records that the Indo-Scythian Lokakṣema (支婁迦讖 Zhi Loujiachen), collaborated with an Indian, Zhu Shufo⁸² and three Chinese lay assistants: Meng Fu from Luong, Zhang Lian from Nanyang and Zibi from

⁸² Zhu Shufo was the Indian monk who is thought to have supplied the *Aṣṭa* manuscript which Lokakṣema used for his translation. See also Zacchetti 1996: 138.

Nanhai (Guangzhou).⁸³ Zürcher (1977: 177-203)⁸⁴ concludes that T224 was written for a semi-literate public, to be understood by a listening audience, a vernacular which deviates in various degrees from “standard classical Chinese” or *weyan*. Silk (2013: 29) commenting on Zürcher’s findings notes, “The scriptures are teeming with “vulgarisms,” ... syntactic patterns are simple and artless, and the vocabulary is rather limited.” He comments further that although Lokakṣema used many terms previously introduced by An Shigao, when no existing equivalent was found, he devised his own term. However, Nattier (2008: 75) notes that Lokakṣema appears to have favoured the use of transcription for many Buddhist technical terms “...making little or no effort to domesticate the terminology of his Indian source texts.” Nattier (2008: 80) also notes that Lokakṣema’s translation in turn “...has not been transmitted without alteration.” She explains that there are instances of “clustering,” “anomalous features,” showing atypical terminology for a given text.⁸⁵

⁸³ Lancaster (1975: 31) states that Lokakṣema joined the translation team that had been established by An Shigao.

⁸⁴ Zürcher acknowledges that apart from rough, course vernacular forms, distortion also occurred due to translation errors incurred in working from a non-Chinese base text.

⁸⁵ Silk (2013: 425-426) states that an examination of the findings of scholars in the field of Chinese historical linguistics, specifically in early Buddhist texts, shows that Zhi Qian’s T225 version of the *Aṣṭa*, when compared to Lokakṣema’s text, has been “polished” in that transcribed proper names are replaced with translations and “vulgar” expressions replaced by more regular forms. “...the whole passage, which in the Han version does not show any metric regularity, is forced into a rigid four-syllable pattern.” It is unclear whether some of Zhi Qian’s amendments were actually written interlineally into the “original” Lokakṣema text.

vi. Contents of the *Aṣṭa*.

According to the Gidding's English translation, the *Aṣṭa* (T224) contains thirty chapters. If it is possible to reduce the narrative to a core message, we could say that questions focus on a bodhisattva's entrance into the Buddha path and the pursuit of *prajñāpāramitā*. In order to situate the predominantly *avaivartika* chapter (fifteen) in the unfolding dialogue, I will present a brief synopsis of chapters as follows:

Chapter 1

The Buddha and a great assembly of bodhisattvas gather at Gṛadhrakūṭa "Vulture" Peak. At the request of the Buddha and through his power, Subhūti speaks of how to train fearlessly in *prajñāpāramitā* and apprehend omniscience (*sarvajña*). Key to the message is that seeking *sarvajña*, and *prajñāpāramitā* through examination of the five skandhas and with knowledge/words is fruitless as words themselves are nothing and dharmas, including the notion of a "bodhisattva" are of no essence/substance ("neither exists or non-exists"). Many examples are given relating to the paradox of endeavors in pursuit of *prajñāpāramitā*, all of which illustrate the fruitlessness of such pursuits. An explanation of the qualities of a mahāsattva and Mahāyāna follows, with intimations of their compassionate aspects.

Chapter 2

Śakra and a host of devas join the assembly. Śakra requests an explanation of how devas can pursue *prajñāpāramitā*. A lengthy disquisition by the Buddha follows, whereby the lesser *śrāvaka* paths are explained as not immovable, “not dwelt within” as each is in transition to a higher state. These lesser paths are further spoken of as empty illusions. Subhūti explains that the signs of *prajñāpāramitā* are evident in an *avaivartin* bodhisattva who is the embodiment of its causes. Śakra’s sprinkling of flowers on Subhūti is explained as a further expression of nothingness: nothing to hold onto, nothing to let go of or nothing to know or find. The *pāramitās* should be undertaken with this understanding.

Chapter 3

Śākyamuni Buddha relates his story of how he found *prajñāpāramitā* and then received a prediction from Dīpaṃkara Buddha. The devas and Śakra promise their protection to beings who train in *prajñāpāramitā*. The Buddha reiterates that no harm will befall beings who recite, write and worship *prajñāpāramitā*. The Buddha explains to Śakra how both the Tathāgata and *sarvajña* are born from *prajñāpāramitā*, the rarity of those who seek and find it and the vast merits obtained through writing it. But if shared with other people, even greater merits are accrued. Śakra holds the *prajñāpāramitā* in his heart and evil influences surrounding the Buddha are warded

off. Ānanda seeks clarification regarding the pāramitās, to which the Buddha replies that *prajñāpāramitā* underpins all pāramitās. Buddha predicts that the many classes of devas present will have faith in and receive *prajñāpāramitā*.

Chapter 4

Dialogue between Maitreya Bodhisattva and Subhūti on a bodhisattva mahāsattva's practice of "delight"⁸⁶ in the merits of others who engage in giving and ethical conduct.⁸⁷ However, the cause of all virtue/merit comes from the arising of the wish for *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* (unsurpassed complete perfect enlightenment). The dialogue progresses to that of a practice of a bodhisattva mahāsattva's act of giving couched in an understanding of *prajñāpāramitā*. This is *upāyakaūśalya*. As a result of this explanation, many offerings are made to the Buddha by the various classes of devas.

⁸⁶ See Karashima 2011: 129 fnt. 3. Gidding's translation of "delights" accords with Karashima's explanation of the Sanskrit *anuvṛmud* "to sympathize with, to rejoice, to allow with pleasure, express approval, applaud, permit."

⁸⁷ In the context of this chapter, *upāyakaūśalya* in reference to the parāmitā of giving, appears to be the ultimate act of merit, one co-joined with the wisdom of *prajñāpāramitā*. See Nattier 2003: 155 for her explanation of *upāyakaūśalya* as used in the *Aṣṭa*. She notes that at this stage, "In no case does it [upāyakaūśalya] involve interaction with others."

Chapter 5

The Buddha, in answer to Śāriputra's inquiry, discourses on what *prajñāpāramitā* is, what it causes and how to know it. The discourse reverts to the sufferings that befall beings who blaspheme the dharma/*prajñāpāramitā*.

Chapter 6.

A dialogue between the Buddha, Subhūti and Śāriputra concerning all dharmas which have as their root, peace and calm, are pervaded by the wisdom of emptiness and which ultimately lead a bodhisattva to know *prajñāpāramitā*. As a result of the discourse, various devas — Śākras, and Brahmās, experience a vision of a thousand Buddhas, each named Śākyamuni and each with a disciple named Subhūti.

Chapter 7

The Buddha, in dialogue with Subhūti, explains how Maitreya, after his enlightenment will speak of *prajñāpāramitā*. Forty qualifiers of *pāramitā* ⁸⁸ are listed in order to designate its empty nature in terms of the negation of mundane notions.

Chapter 8

Śakra inquires how a bodhisattva takes up and abides in *prajñāpāramitā*. The Buddha answers that deep listening, as well as the ripening of merit and aspiration will cause faith to arise; faith in turn gives rise to an *avaivartīn*, *sarvajñā* and a Tathāgata.

⁸⁸ Here we are led to understand that *pāramitā* is a shortened form of *prajñāpāramitā*.

The Buddha explains that a bodhisattva in pursuit of *prajñāpāramitā* does not dwell in any of the five skandhas as they are impermanent. A discussion follows concerning those bodhisattvas who have received a prediction and those who have not, with the implication being that those predicted will soon understand *prajñāpāramitā*. The discussion culminates in talk of nothingness of dharmas including the pursuit of *prajñāpāramitā*. Māra cannot harm a bodhisattva mahāsattva who is protected by all the Buddhas.

Chapters 9-11

The Buddha cautions as to the beguiling deeds of Māra which causes reverting to *śrāvaka* status and pursuing *śrotāpanna*, *sakṛdāgāmin*, *anāgāmin* or *arhat* paths. Much emphasis is placed on reciting, chanting and writing the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* as all Tathāgatas are born from this. A Tathāgata, knowing all minds, for the good of others, sets out *prajñāpāramitā*. The depth of *prajñāpāramitā* requires faith and for those who possess it, gives assurance of being born in Maitreya's Tuṣita heaven.

Chapters 12-13

Using various similes, the Buddha elaborates on the theme of backsliding to lesser paths and explains that joy, faith and vigor are needed to reach the omniscient state of *sarvajñā*. Training in skill in means (*upāyakauśalya*) (here, somewhat ambiguous in meaning but appears to relate to the way of pursuing *prajñāpāramitā*) is needed also. A

bodhisattva new to the path practices the six perfections without holding onto them; practices seeking the five skandhas without attachment and does so for the good of the world. A bodhisattva is exhorted to give up attachment to all dharmas, as they are like space, an illusion, a dream. A bodhisattva practices in this way to liberate countless beings. Much oratory pertaining to “not this nor that,” and so nothing to grasp, follows in characteristic dialogic fashion.

Chapter 14

Further rhetoric between the Buddha and Subhūti concerning “nothing” (insubstantiality); that non-attachment to the skandhas, the path, the Tathāgata and all dharmas have as their basis “nothing.” Members of the assembly, including *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī* sangha and devas, experience degrees of attainments. However, some new bodhisattvas, having practiced the pāramitās without an infusion of *prajñāpāramitā*, revert to the level of an *arhat*. Concluding remarks by the Buddha state that a compassionate heart speaking to all is the fulfillment of a bodhisattva.

Chapters 15

The Buddha explains to Subhūti the signs and attributes of an *avaivartika* bodhisattva (*avivartin*),⁸⁹ the foremost sign being that such a one is fearless and

⁸⁹ Where this term appears, Giddings (2010) translates it from the Chinese as *avivartin*, used as both adjective and noun. The form *avaivartika* appears in many *śāstras* which suggests a later usage (Gills,

unshakable even though Māra comes in various guises to turn him from his quest. Moreover, *avaivartin* bodhisattvas do not concern themselves with worldly matters but immerse themselves at all times in *prajñāpāramitā* and reincarnate in the middle country (Madhyadesha) to explain it to others.

Chapter 16

The Buddha, again in dialogue with Subhūti, discusses the merits of a bodhisattva (compared with the lesser merit of a *śrotāpanna*, *sakṛdāgāmin*, *anāgāmin*, *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha*) engaged in *dāna* and *sīla* whilst pursuing “the deep” *prajñāpāramitā*. This merit enables the seeing of the five skandhas in their true form “as nothing.” Further discussion of dharmas as “named” phenomena only, with no truly existing attributes. Gaṅgā Upāsikā strews flowers on the Buddha who proclaims that in a previous life she had the thought of awakening before Dīpaṃkara Buddha and received the prediction (*vyākaraṇa*) that in a future life she would be born as a man and become a Buddha named Suvarṇapuṣpa in the field (*kṣetra*) of Akṣobhya Buddha.

2010: 37). I justify the use of *avaivartika* on the grounds that it is the more commonly preferred form of the word and so readily understood by receiving audiences.

Chapter 17

Discussion on the samādhi of space⁹⁰ whereby the skandhas and dharmas are perceived to be like space where there is no fixation on anything. Bodhisattvas pursue *nirvana*, emptiness and perfect wisdom but do not enter these because of a compassionate wish to return to protect all beings, this being the essence of *upāyakaśālyā* (Giddings T224: 458c26-459a02, parallel passage Karashima 2011: 345). Subhūti inquires how a bodhisattva on the path can experience pain but at the same time not see himself on the path. The Buddha answers that in the samādhi of space there is no “splitting apart,” no signs or wish for samādhi. In this state, a bodhisattva no longer sees himself on the path. This condition is the *upāyakaśālyā* which protects.

Chapter 18

The Buddha gives more signs of an *avaivartika* bodhisattva, foremost of which are fearlessness and the resolve to teach beings everywhere in order to alleviate suffering. The Buddha cautions Subhūti about the feigned intent of some falsely self-proclaimed *avaivartins* who inevitably fall prey to Māra.

⁹⁰ Giddings (T 224: 458b17) translates 空 as “samādhi” as in “samādhi of space” whilst Karashima’s equivalent (2011: 343) is “emptiness” as in “cultivation of emptiness.”

Chapter 19

Continuing dialogue between Buddha and Subhūti regarding a spiritual friend for those in pursuit. The fundamental importance of the six pāramitās which contain all teachings, are endorsed as the progenitor of all tathāgatas. To reach fulfillment is to realize the emptiness of all dharmas, the finding of *prajñāpāramitā* and the cause of great compassion for beings in the world.

Chapter 20

Śakra inquires as to the vast store of merit needed for the realization of *prajñāpāramitā*, to which the Buddha replies that in hearing, writing and training in *prajñāpāramitā*, such merit is accumulated. The Buddha further elaborates saying that a bodhisattva mahāsattva with this meritorious accumulation is placed above all others, others who practice the pāramitās, but do so without perfect wisdom and skill in means

Chapter 21

The Buddha reiterates the dangers of Māra's beguiling ways for a bodhisattva seeking *prajñāpāramitā*, but especially for one who deserts his teacher in such a pursuit. Further elaboration follows explaining the "fallen" bodhisattva's debased actions and consequently his diminishing merits. The dialogue with Ānanda then turns to the expediency of remorse after such situations arise, and the correct communal conduct for bodhisattvas to follow.

Chapter 22

Discussion on training (method) in various aspects of dharma, the requisite training/learning for *sarvajñā* and for the extinction of suffering.⁹¹ Bodhisattvas who train in these methods are free from various impoverished and inopportune states⁹² of existence. Such Bodhisattvas have *upāyakaśālyā-prajñāpāramitā*.⁹³ But the ultimate form of training is the pursuit of *prajñāpāramitā* as it contains all the other pāramitās and leads to *sarvajñā*.

Chapter 23

Śakra inquires why some bodhisattva pursue Buddhahood, then makes the wish that such beings can fulfill this desire and “carry others over” in the process. The Buddha gives a simple description of the path from the first thought of awakening to the stage of an *abhiṣeka* bodhisattva and the limitless merit/joy arising from such attainments. Subhūti brings the dialogue back to the “rhetoric of nothing,” applying it to everything such as mind/heart, method, pursuit, awakening and *prajñāpāramitā*

⁹¹ See Karashima 2011: 408 fnt. 128 for Sanskrit parallels which state, “He trains to ensure the non-interruption of the lineage of the Tathagatas.”

⁹² Inopportune in relation to having the right prerequisites to meet and practice the dharma.

⁹³ The use of this term in the above context appears to imply two things. First, that *upāyakaśālyā* is related to how a bodhisattva employs skillful methods in his own pursuit (as opposed to its later connotation of skillful means in teaching others); second, that training in all the various aspects of dharma are never separated from *prajñāpāramitā*.

which, whilst having no substance, brings to completion all *sūtra* dharmas including *sarvajñā*.

Chapter 24

A discussion of how a bodhisattva, after being born in Abhirati, becomes an *avaivartin* due to faith in *prajñāpāramitā*. Māra cannot turn them from the path because they see dharmas as empty and have the irreversible wish to protect all beings. Further, Māra is not able to shake the *avaivartika* bodhisattva because of their vow and because they are protected by the Buddha. The Buddha mentions that a bodhisattva following Akṣobhya Buddha and his disciple Ratnaketu Bodhisattva, is also protected. More rhetoric follows about pursuing *prajñāpāramitā* and the seeming paradox of existing and non-existing, seeing and not seeing, finding and not finding. Many devas and one hundred and sixty bhikṣus scatter mādārava flowers on the Buddha who predicts they will become Buddhas with the name of Avakīrṇakusuma.

Chapter 25

Buddha explains to Ānanda the necessity of training in the six pāramitās but to realize them and become a Buddha one must train in *prajñāpāramitā* as all Buddhas come from *prajñāpāramitā*. A vision of Akṣobhya Buddha surrounded by myriad bodhisattvas and *arhats* is conjured up only to instantly disappear. The illusionary nature of the event is used to illustrate the emptiness of all dharmas. Buddha entrusts

the six pāramitās to Ānanda, instructs him to teach others, and reminds him of the merits accumulated from such an act.

Chapter 26

Subhūti inquires how to think of *prajñāpāramitā*. The Buddha replies that just as the five skandhas and the twelve nidānas are endless,⁹⁴ so like this, *prajñāpāramitā* is endless. *Upāyakaśālyā* is completed by pursuing *prajñāpāramitā* and from *prajñāpāramitā* all Buddhas are born. Those bodhisattvas who pursue *prajñāpāramitā* dwell on *avaivartīn* grounds, never falling to lower paths.

Chapter 27

Subhūti asks the Buddha, “what causes bodhisattvas to follow *prajñāpāramitā* teachings?” The Buddha gives various reasons: dharmas are endless, skandhas, elements and sense organs are without substance. Then follows many similes which illustrate the way in which bodhisattvas follow *prajñāpāramitā*, all pervaded by the notion of emptiness/nothing.

Chapters 28-29

The Buddha tells Subhūti that bodhisattvas should emulate Sadāprarudita Bodhisattva. The Buddha then narrates of the story of Sadāprarudita who, on the

⁹⁴ Giddings 2010 (n.p.) Ch. 26 fnt. 11, notes that “endless” here refers to the task of pursuing the various objects of inquiry and not to the object itself. As these objects are all illusionary in nature, to seek is an endless undertaking. Giddings suggests the term “baseless” as a more readable alternative to “endless”.

advice of a deva in a dream, goes in search of *prajñāpāramitā* from a teacher called Dharmodgata. Along the way he passes through Māra territory where he decides to sell his flesh in return for offerings for Dharmodgata. A merchant's daughter and her five hundred servants join Sadāprarudita in his quest. Śakra intervenes and restores Sadāprarudita's body. Sadāprarudita experiences the samādhi of seeing the Buddhas of the ten directions as well as the sixty thousand samādhis. Dharmodgata teaches the meaning of *prajñāpāramitā* for seven days to a vast assembly of bodhisattvas after which Sadāprarudita receives a prediction that he will become a future Buddha named Kāma-Katidha-Phalāya.

Chapter 30

The Buddha entrusts the teachings of *prajñāpāramitā* to Ānanda. He is instructed to memorize it, write it and teach it to other bodhisattvas.

4. Explanation of *avaivartika*

4.1 The term

The term *avaivartika* is translated in Chinese from Indic sources as 不退轉, Romanized in pinyin as *bùtuìzhuǎn* and transliterated as 阿惟越致 *a wei yue zhi* or 阿鞞跋致 *a bi ba zhi*. The Tibetan equivalent is translated as ཕྱིར་མི་ལྷོག་ *phyir mi ldog*. The Buddhist Sanskrit word *avaivartika* is the negation of the *vṛddhi* derivative of

*vivarta*⁹⁵ (“turning around” etc.) with *ika* secondary suffix. The BHSD s.v. *avaivartika* lists the meaning of *avaivartika* as “not liable to turning back,” commonly stated as non-retrogression or irreversible. This term is used to describe a bodhisattva at a stage on the path to Buddhahood at which further progress is assured and where there is no possibility of retrogressing to a previous stage. Conze (1983: 243) succinctly captures the essence of its meaning in the following:

... a condition in which a Bodhisattva is inevitably bound to become a Buddha, either (a) because he has been predicted by a Buddha who preceded him (as Śākyamuni by Dīpaṅkara) or (b) because he is incapable of switching over to the methods of salvation practiced by the Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas, and for that reason is unable to give up the quest for perfect enlightenment.

Conversely, a bodhisattva who is designated *vaivartika* is one who has regressed or succumbed to falling back to a lesser path or stage.

⁹⁵ See MW s.v. *vi-ni-√vṛit* for a related form, *vartate*, “to turn back.”

4.2. Variations of the term

In the BHSD (p. 79 s.v. *avaivartika*), Edgerton notes various Sanskrit equivalents of the most common form, *avaivartika*. These include: *avivartya*, *avinivartya*, *avinivartaniya*, *anivart(i)ya*, *avaivarta*, and *avivart(i)ya*. According to BHSD (s.v. *avinivartaniya* p. 78),⁹⁶ *avinivartaniya* is the form commonly used in reference to and occurring with “bodhisattva” and *vivartati*, (BHSD s.v. *vivartati*) usually used for a bodhisattva who falls back/backslides from one *bhūmi* (level/stage) to a lower one. *Anivarta/ anivartiya* is commonly used with *anivartana-caryā/avivarta-caryā* (BHSD p. 25) signifying “... a *course* or *stage* that is not liable to turning back,” implying that a bodhisattva at a certain stage of development is not capable of backsliding. Fronsdal (1998: 234 fnt. 16) notes that based on the four sinograms used by Lokakṣema in the *Aṣṭa* (T224), a Romanized approximation of the Prakrit word for *avaivartika*, is *a-vi-va-ti*. Other equivalents of *avaivartika* in Gāndhārī are Romanized as *avevaṭīae*, *aveva(ṭīasa)*, *avevaṭīasa*, *(avevaṭi)asa*, *avevaṭiana*, *avevaṭia* (Gandhari Dictionary [GD] s.v. *avavetiga*). A related form, *avivartin*⁹⁷ is used by Giddings throughout his English translation of the *Aṣṭa* (T224) and so I use this form when citing or referring to his

⁹⁶ Gilks (2010: 37) notes that this form is most often used in *Prajñāpāramitā* texts and that the form “... *avaivartika* is never used in the *Aṣṭa* although it is used in many *śāstras*.” Because of this, Gilks surmises that, “... *avaivartika* is a later form that has exactly the same meaning as *avinivartaniya*.”

⁹⁷ Used as epithet, “an avivartin” and in adjectival position such as “avivartin ground.”

translated version. Where a text uses the English equivalents, “irreversible,” “non-regression,” or “non-retrogression,” I follow this convention. Otherwise, I use the most common Sanskrit form, *avaivartika* when generally referring to this notion.

4.3 Problems with the term

The term *avaivartika* is polysemous. It has been used in a variety of ways with correspondingly different meanings and understandings. First, if used to denote a *bhūmi* stage at which a bodhisattva is said to achieve *avaivartika* status, this exact stage is disputed in both *sūtra* and *śāstra*. As well as this disparity, different practices are purported to lead to the attainment marking an *avaivartika* bodhisattva without reference, in some instances, to any path-stage. A comparative look at the following select passages will make apparent the inconsistencies just mentioned.

In Nāgārjuna’s commentary, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*,⁹⁸ a developmental stage-approach in achieving non-regression is outlined. Here the non-regressing bodhisattva falls into a three-fold division which, for expediency, I have named potential, attainment, and commitment. The first non-regressing stage is associated with the potential to practice, the second stage is that of attainment — the realization of emptiness coupled with compassion, and the third stage is the bodhisattva firmly

⁹⁸ This *śāstra*’s attribution to Nāgārjuna has been challenged by both Lamotte and more recently by Zacchetti (2021) in his study of the *Da zhidu lun* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*).

resolved by a vow to become a Buddha. The following passage outlines these non-regressing bodhisattva types:

If the bodhisattva practices or meditates on one single dharma, he is called a non-regressing bodhisattva. What is this one single dharma? ... It is right effort. ... Furthermore, the bodhisattva who possesses two dharmas is without regression. What are these two dharmas? Knowing that all dharmas are empty (*śūnya*) and never abandoning beings. The person who does that is a non-regressing bodhisattva. Finally, the bodhisattva who possesses three dharmas is without regression. Resolutely (*ekacittena*) he has made the vow (*praṇidhāna*) to become a Buddha, and this resolution is unshakable ... his compassion for all beings penetrates his bones (*asthi*) and marrow (*majjā*). He has attained the samadhi of wisdom (*prajñāsamādhi*) and sees all Buddhas of the present (*pratyutpanna*). Thus, he is called a non-regressing bodhisattva.

(Lamotte 2001, Vol. I: 206-207)

Chun (1993) notes a similar use of the term in the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra*, *Shih di jing*, (henceforth *Daśa*) in that the state of irreversibility is a set of accomplishments extending over several stages. According to a passage from the *Daśa* (T286, 103: 10-

104.1)⁹⁹ the sixth *bhūmi* is designated as the stage where a bodhisattva has an irreversible mind, in the sense that it does not back-slide,

... is attained in the stage of wisdom, is turned away from the stages of Śrāvaka and Pratyekabuddha ... is well nurtured by the performance of dharma of emptiness, no-mark, and no-wish, is endowed with reflection of skill-in-means and wisdom. (Chun 1993: 335-36)

However, Chun notes (1993: 410) that according to this *sūtra*, it is not until the eighth stage, the stage of non-retrogression, that a bodhisattva is truly “immovable.” This highlights the notion of irreversibility as a nuanced hierarchy of attainments over three stages, culminating in the state of full or complete irreversibility.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ See Chun 1993: 309-421 for the English translation of the sixth, seventh and eighth bodhisattva stages in the *Dāśa*, translated from both the Sanskrit and Chinese texts. Chun notes that the ten bodhisattva stages in this *sūtra* are influenced by previous systems; the three paths in the *Nikāyas* and *Abhidharma* traditions, various *Jātaka* tales, the ten stages in the *Mahāvastu* and early *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* (2003: 11). This *sūtra* also appears as the 26th chapter of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. Chun (1993: 132: 133) records in his textual survey that there were six Chinese versions of this *sūtra* produced from third century CE. to end of eighth century CE. The earliest of these versions was the *Jiān bei jīng* by Dharmarakṣa ca. 297 CE. See Chun 1993: 133–135 for an overview of the Sanskrit textual production of this *sūtra*. See also Gilks 2010: 168 ff.

¹⁰⁰ Chun acknowledges only that his English translation is based on Chinese and Sanskrit manuscripts of the *sūtra*. Kumārajīva’s Chinese version of the *Daśa* produced ca. 402–409 CE. most likely reflects a more developed version of the earliest extant Chinese recension of the text. As such, it is important to

We find a certain amount of agreement as to the path-stage designation of *avivartacaryā* status in the *Mahāvastu*¹⁰¹ although presented in a different manner. Here the Buddha explains to Mahā-Maudgalyāyana that the bodhisattva who has attained *avivartacaryā* is on the highest of four “career” stages, namely, the “perservering” career. At this stage “*Avivartacaryā* means that they are unwaveringly set for enlightenment” (Jones 1949: 52). The *Mahāvastu* then correlates this so-called “career” stage with the eighth *bhūmi* where it states:

From the eighth *bhūmi* onwards, O son of the Conqueror, Bodhisattvas are to be looked upon as perfect Buddhas. For after that they do not lapse.
(Jones 1949: 83)

However, as previously stated, the appellation of *avaivartika* has also been accorded to a bodhisattva without reference to any formulated path structure. For

remember that the *bhūmi* system in Kumārajīva’s recension could also include interpolated expansions of such a notion.

¹⁰¹ See Gilks 2010: 41. The *Mahāvastu* is a text belonging to the Lokottaravāda branch of Mahāsāṃghikas. It contains many proto-Mahāyāna concepts such as the ten bodhisattva *bhūmis* where *vivartanti* (irreversible) bodhisattvas are mentioned. It is thought to date from first or second century BCE.

example, in the Larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra* (T360),¹⁰² the uttering of Amitābha's (Amitāyus) name with deep faith is said to be all that is necessary to be born in Sukhāvatī, Amitābha's *buddhakṣetra* (Pure Realm), where one is assured of attaining the rank of non-retrogression and where failure to hear this *sūtra* can impact a bodhisattva negatively and result in regression (*vaivartika*). As it is said in this *sūtra*:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, bodhisattvas in the lands of the other directions who hear my Name should not instantly reach the stage of non-retrogression, may I not attain perfect enlightenment. (Inagaki: 2003: 18)¹⁰³

According to Inagaki (1962: 347-348) this practice is underpinned by the belief that Amitābha's merits are all contained in his name and realm which are then readily transferrable to those with faith. The Smaller *Sukhāvatīvyūha* text¹⁰⁴ encourages

¹⁰² The first translation of the Larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra* (T362) into Chinese is attributed to Lokakṣema. Inagaki, in his translation of the Larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra*, uses as base text T360 which he attributes to the Chinese translator Saṃghavarman, an incorrect attribution according to Nattier who attributes it to Buddhahadra and Baoyun ca. 429 CE.

¹⁰³ Fujita 2011: 25: *sacen me bhagavan bodhiprāptasya tatra buddhakṣetre tadanyeṣu buddhakṣetreṣu ye bodhisattvā mama nāmadheyam śṛṇuyus te sahanāmadheyaśravaṇān nāvaivartikā bhav/eyur annuttarāyāḥ samyaksaṃbodher mā tāvad aham anuttarāṃ samyaksaṃbodhim abhisambudhyeyam.*

¹⁰⁴ See Inagaki 2003: 93. The Smaller *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra* (T336), the earliest extant recension by Kumārajīva, early fifth C., reiterates the promotion of devotional-based practices such as calling Amitābha's name. See also Harrison's translation of the *Pratyutpannasamādhi-sūtra* (T418) 1998: 30, 907.

beings to earnestly aspire to be born in the Pure Land where they will not only actualize this aspiration by being born there but will, on arrival, attain the state of non-retrogression. Expressions of *avaivartika* in these *sūtras* show certain similarities with several other early Mahāyāna texts, where there is only a rudimentary hierarchical structure of attainments. However, the means whereby *avaivartika* status is attained in Pure Land texts is doctrinally an entirely different presentation when compared to texts like Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224).

5. Expressions of *Avaivartika*

5.1 Early uses of the term

Lokakṣema's transliterated form of *avaivartika* 阿惟越致 (*ā wéi yuè zhì*) appears in the *Aṣṭa* (T224) a total of one hundred and ten times.¹⁰⁵ I will now look at how it is

¹⁰⁵ Gilks (2010: 10), working from the later Sanskrit *Aṣṭa*, states that this term appears ninety-six times. Surprisingly, despite its accreted nature, it makes fewer references to the term *avaivartika* compared to Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa*. Although T224 contains the most references to irreversibility, five additional *sūtras* (T313, T418, T458, T624, and T626) translated into Chinese by Lokakṣema between 168 and 189 CE., mention irreversible bodhisattvas. Of note, in T313, bodhisattvas who abide in the pure land of Akṣobhya are said to be irreversible; in T418, bodhisattvas who have attained *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* are irreversible and in T458, irreversibility is associated with the second deed of a Buddha in the manifestation of a bodhisattva.

used in this early period, who receives the designation of *avaivartika* and which conditions are perceived as optimal for a bodhisattva's realization of such. I will also examine passages which discuss the rarity of this attainment thereby endorsing this credential as a high-status marker of a bodhisattva.

As a suitable starting point, I will explore how the *Aṣṭa* (T224) situates the *avaivartika* / *avivartin* bodhisattva in relation to other bodhisattvas. This is done in a rudimentary hierarchical manner as follows:

Those bodhisattvas new to raising the thought do so joyfully yet what merits are found? Furthermore, those bodhisattvas that go gradually do so joyfully yet what merits are found? Going towards avivartin and thence to abhiṣeka, are done joyfully, yet what merits are to be found?

(T224: 465c19-21)¹⁰⁶

According to this early typology, the *avaivartika* bodhisattva occupies the third rung in a loosely designated but progressive order of four groups. Occupying the two lower levels are first, the newly aroused bodhisattva (*navayānasamprasthita*), then the

¹⁰⁶ See also T224: 465c23-466a4 which clearly references these bodhisattva types in ascending order.

bodhisattva progressing along the path (*adhibhū*), whilst above the *avaivartika*, in highest position, is the *abhiṣeka* bodhisattva. So, at this stage of doctrinal development, in this text, the non-regressive *avivartin* is incorporated in a simple structural model; there is no ordering according to a *bhūmi*-based path structure.¹⁰⁷ This model does not displace the ideal of an *arhat* and *pratyekabuddha* but assures these adherents that after hearing the *sūtra* – and they are not excluded, they too will train in *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom as they pursue their respective paths.¹⁰⁸ As is stated:

Those desiring to train in arhat dharmas will, upon hearing of prajñāpāramitā begin to train, uphold and maintain it. Those desiring to train in pratyekabuddha dharmas will, upon hearing of prajñāpāramitā begin to train, uphold and maintain it. Those desiring to train in bodhisattva dharmas will, upon hearing of prajñāpāramitā begin to train, uphold and maintain it. (T224: 426a06-07)

¹⁰⁷ Fronsdal (1998: 233) notes that although the term *bhūmi* does appear in the Sanskrit versions of the *Aṣṭa* (T224), it is compounded with *śrāvaka-bhūmi*, *pratyekabuddha-bhūmi* or the *bodhisattva-bhūmi*, indicating alternate sociological options. It is not connected to a linear bodhisattva *bhūmi* path at this stage.

¹⁰⁸ The translation is not entirely clear but appears to suggest that the *arhat* and *pratyekabuddha* will enhance the wisdom aspect of their paths through training in *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom.

If we look at the textual contexts which reference the term *avivartin*, we find that it is inextricably linked with *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom. In the opening chapter of the *Aṣṭa* (T224), in reply to Subhūti's disquisition on the training required for a bodhisattva, the Buddha replies:

To become a Buddha requires training to be a Buddha ... Wisdom of the emptiness of self is said to be the foremost. Bodhisattvas able to progress within this have already become an *avivartin*, training with words is ended and there [is] no relapse from *prajñāpāramitā*. (T224: 426a03-05)

This is the first reference in the text to the *avivartin* bodhisattva which states that the realization of the emptiness of self and the continual progress therein/henceforth, is the marker of an irreversible bodhisattva, after which the ultimate goal of Buddhahood is assured. Throughout these early chapters, although the *avivartin* is inextricably linked with *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom, the dialogue is overwhelmingly a eulogy to *prajñāpāramitā*; training in it and the respect and worship which should be accorded to it. For those seeking *avivartin* credentials as the first incontrovertible marker of Buddhahood, *prajñāpāramitā* gives an assurance that:

If some good son or daughter then takes up volumes of the
 prajñāpāramitā sūtra, [and] together with others writes it; if this leads to
 its training; if it is discussed, then they will become avivartin bodhisattvas.

(T224: 437b25-27)

In this passage the text appears to be addressing bodhisattvas – with a notable inclusive reference to “daughters” who are *navayānasamprasthita* or *adhibhū* as it gives prescriptive advice as to how to train to attain *avivartin*. Additional remarks as to the importance of training for the attainment of *avivartin* occur in the passage T224: 464c20 ff. In other words, it appears that the training component is here meant as a directive to lead to the irreversible state, not an undertaking to be pursued by one who has already arrived at this state.

Further dialogue between Śāriputra and the Buddha (Chapter 8) suggests that the training is now specifically referencing faith in *prajñāpāramitā*, and so a bodhisattva whose efforts have led to this contributing factor, reaches *avivartin* ground. For here the text states:

Bodhisattvas mahāsattvas that have faith in the transmission of the deep prajñāpāramitā they are seen to be avivartins... Because of their efforts they have faith in prajñāpāramitā. (T224: 444c2-5)

These rather cursory remarks regarding *avivartin* status do not allow the reader much interpretive possibility. For example, we do not know whether the *avivartin* bodhisattva in the above citation has faith in *prajñāpāramitā* because of his previous experience of emptiness, or whether he is accorded *avivartin* status due merely to deep faith in the *sūtra*, born of his energetic endeavours.

This uncertainty is somewhat clarified in the passage T224: 467c8-16 which relates to a bodhisattva who follows the teachings of a Pure Land Buddha, and who is thus poised to enter the ground of *avaivartika*. Here the *Aṣṭa* (T224) states, unlike the *Sukhāvatīvyūha* texts, that the conferral of *avaivartika* status to such a bodhisattva is inextricably tied to, perhaps contingent on the pursuit of *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom that realizes emptiness. The Buddha says to Subhūti:

There are bodhisattvas following Akṣobhya Buddha, and bodhisattvas following Ratnaketu Buddha ... those bodhisattva mahāsattva in pursuit of prajñāpāramitā ... [are] certain that all dharmas are basically empty.

Those bodhisattvas will find entry into avivartin grounds. Following the teachings of the dharma [they] will soon become avivartins.

(T224: 467c8-16)

Hence, according to the above passage (T224: 467c8-16), it appears that to be a contender for *avaivartika* status, a bodhisattva must have an initial realization of the emptiness of all dharmas. We could conclude that a progressive refinement of endeavours from this position are purported to lead to Buddhahood.

A reoccurring motif in Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) is the rarity of achieving the high spiritual attainment of *avaivartika* which could suggest a high prestige status accorded to those who have achieved this.¹⁰⁹ Typical of such passages is:

Of those training in prajñāpāramitā, few will become avivartin. A bodhisattva should then think, "I will through the power of my training become avivartin." (T224: 465a24-a26)

Similarly, in another such passage, the Buddha, in dialogue with Śakra (Kauśika), again expresses the rarity of achieving this high spiritual attainment leading to

¹⁰⁹ *Avaivartika* considered as a status achieving marker could also explain why the Buddha cautions bodhisattvas against feigning this title. (T224, Chapter 18)

Buddhahood. When Śakra remarks that few only pursue the *śrotāpanna*, *sakṛdāgāmin*, *anāgāmin*, *arhat*, and *pratyekabuddha* paths, the Buddha's replies that:

So it is that countless asaṃkhyeyas of people come to seek the Buddha path, then from amongst these will come maybe one or two that dwell upon avivartin grounds. (T224: 432b07-08)¹¹⁰

The Buddha's repeated references to the paucity in numbers of those actually reaching *avaivartika* grounds could exemplify the plight of many *navayānasamprasthita* bodhisattvas who, in their quest for Buddhahood, regress to the stage of an *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha*.¹¹¹ Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) explains that this back-sliding is due to various reasons, the most prevalent being Māra's persistent trickery (T224: 446c20ff.), the arousal of fear when hearing the *prajñāpāramitā* teachings (T224: 427a27-29), and the damage caused by harmful teachers who follow "motley sutras" (T224: 427b2-3).

¹¹⁰ Considering the context in which these passages are found, the underlying message is unequivocally that very few will pursue/understand the wisdom of *prajñāpāramitā* which makes highest attainment possible.

¹¹¹ See T224: 453c2-3 for an anecdotal tale of regression. The Buddha, after delivering a sermon on emptiness, reported that, "... sixty newly training bodhisattvas all reached the arhat path," because they lacked *prajñāpāramitā upāyakaūśalya*. In this context we understand that the "reaching" occurred in the wrong direction, that they in fact "regressed".

However, *prajñāpāramitā* rhetoric, especially in this early phase of Mahāyāna development, is rarely unequivocal. In dialectical fashion, both sides of an issue are explored, then brusquely dismissed as neither this or that. So, true to this form of investigation, at a later stage in the text (T224: 477a27-b2), when Dharmodgata Bodhisattva was speaking of the life of the Buddha, we are told that many bodhisattvas in the assembly experienced various levels of attainments with forty thousand million (400 *niyutas*)¹¹² bodhisattvas becoming *avivartin*. This suggests that a kind of spontaneous, on-the-spot realization was had by vast numbers of bodhisattvas, in stark contrast to the previous assertions by the Buddha that few or merely one or two will become *avivartin*. It is difficult to know how to read these mystical events. Was this a story meant to inspire fledgling bodhisattvas? Was this an ethereal happening witnessed only by those with supernatural powers or does it simply caution us to read numerical indicators such as “few” “*niyuta*” and “*asamkhyeya*” as value units used meaningfully within the culturally bound system of its time but somewhat questionable outside of it? Perhaps a final reading could be to subject both of these seemingly conflicting claims to the microscopic lens of *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom and realize that both are ultimately empty of any determinate quantitative reality.

¹¹² The text expresses this number in *niyutas* where one *niyuta* is equal to 100 000 in the ancient Indian counting system. A non-literal interpretation can simply mean a very large number.

Further considerations in the *Aṣṭa* (T224) as to the rarity of *avaivartika* bodhisattvas could be explained by the lengthy discussions on the need for merit accumulation as the requisite for *avaivartika* attainment. We see this in the following extract, where the Buddha is addressing Śakra, extolling, by way of metaphor,¹¹³ the merit of infinite proportions associated with each bodhisattva type:

Mount Sumeru can be weighed, known to the pound and ounce yet the merits of the joys that come from raising the first thought cannot be fathomed. ... A whole buddha kṣetra can be weighed, known to the pound and ounce? Ādhibhūmika bodhisattvas, joyous in the pursuit to help others, their merits have no end. ... Were all the waters in the seas of a single Buddha kṣetra split into countless drops, and then drop by drop counted until all those waters were gone, the number of those drops could be counted and known. Avivartin bodhisattvas, joyous in the pursuit to help others, their merits cannot be counted. ... Were all the

¹¹³ Of interest is that these metaphorical descriptions of merit accumulation are by analogy associated with Buddha *kṣetras*, each with increasingly refined *dhatu* affiliations (perhaps the exception being the new bodhisattva, whose merit is likened to Mt. Sumeru, (earth/form) the highest central point in ancient Indian cosmological system. *Adhibhūmika* bodhisattva's merits are compared to a Buddha *kṣetras* (formless). The *avaivartin* bodhisattva's merit is likened to Buddha *kṣetra* seas (water) whilst the *abhiṣeka* bodhisattva's merit are likened to Buddha *kṣetra* space (air).

space in asaṃkhyeya Buddha kṣetras throughout the limits of space, measured by the pint, the half pint the quart, the half quart the gallon and the half gallon, its size could not be known. Abhiṣeka bodhisattvas, joyous in the pursuit to help others, the end of their merits cannot be reached. (T224: 465c23-466a4)

A further reference to the great stockpile of merit needed for *avaivartika* attainment is found in the passage T224: 456a25 where it is stated simply that, “Avivartin bodhisattvas finally come from great merits.”

Thus far I have looked at *avaivartika* in a more general context; as a stage of attainment on the path to Buddhahood, the conditions which might be considered conducive or necessary for its realization – such as vast stocks of merit, and some general references as to the rarity of this status-marking achievement. Other than the already mentioned 400 *niyutas* bodhisattvas becoming *avivartin* in response to Dharmodgata’s talk (T224: 477a27-b2), Lokakṣema’s *Aṣṭa* (T224) does not include any further accounts.¹¹⁴ Hence, I will now turn to several additional texts which have recorded vignettes of those who achieve *avaivartika* status.

¹¹⁴ Lokakṣema’s *Aṣṭa* (T224) is arranged more as an instruction manual for aspiring bodhisattvas wishing to attain Buddhahood whilst the latter sections of the text include advice on how to validly recognize those within the community who lay claim to *avaivartin* status.

The eighth chapter of the *Mahāsaṃnipāta*¹¹⁵ titled the *Gaganagañjaparipṛcchā* (hereafter *GGP*) contains an enigmatic anecdote regarding a group of five hundred widows who achieve *avaivartika* status. This is recorded in the following passage:

... the Bodhisattva Gaganagañja said this to the women: ‘Sisters, bring your respective husbands just as they were’. Then the women, having brought their respective husbands, being filled with rejoicing and happiness of mind, returned to their respective homes. After that, by those magically conjured-up beings, during seven days, the women were brought to maturity, in the way that they attained the stage of not falling back (*avaivartika*) from the supreme and perfect awakening.¹¹⁶ (T404: 628c23-28)

Jaehee Han¹¹⁷ provided the context and explanation for this excerpt which I abridge as follows: At one time the bodhisattva Gaganagañja displayed a number of

¹¹⁵ See Han 2021: 13 fnt. 3. *The Mahāsaṃnipāta* (Great Collection of *Sūtrās*) is a canonical collection consisting of seventeen independently composed *parivartas* which were collected at some point under the title of *Mahāsaṃnipāta*. The place and date of the compilation is unclear, but it is thought to be in Central Asia or China around the third century CE.

¹¹⁶ Amoghavajra’s translation.

¹¹⁷ Private email correspondence 01:11:2022.

miracles which included five hundred magically conjured up “phantom” husbands. He bestowed these husbands on the widows. Whilst it is not exactly clear how the “maturing” of these women happened, it appears that it took place through the medium of their husbands who were used as transformative instruments by Gaganagañja. As a result, they received *avaivartika* status. I hasten to add to Han’s comments that what appears as an acknowledgment of feminine wisdom in this early period is somewhat undermined by the inferred story-line that the *avaivartika* status of the women was made possible only through the wisdom-medium of their respective husbands.

The *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthita Samādhi-sūtra* (T418) (henceforth *PraS*),¹¹⁸ an interesting comparative text as it was translated by Lokakṣema in the same year as the *Aṣṭa* (T224), contains several brief vignettes related to *avaivartika*. In one such recorded event (T418: 905c), the Buddha relates a story of a man, who, after falling asleep, dreamt his appetite was appeased by an abundant array of delicious foods. On awakening, he realized that his stomach was empty, whereby he reflected on the emptiness of all dharmas and immediately attained the state of non-regression

¹¹⁸ The *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthita Samādhi-sūtra*, first translated into Chinese by Lokakṣema and his team as the *Banzhou-sanmei-jing* in 179 CE. and translated from the Chinese (redaction A) by Paul Harrison, 1998. Seven fragments of a Gāndhārī manuscript of this *sūtra* have been found, bundled together with a large number of *śrāvakayāna* texts, provenance unknown, dating to first or second century CE. See Harrison, Lenz and Salomon, 2018.

(Harrison 1998: 20). As in Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224), *avaivartika* status in the *PraS* is contingent on the realization of emptiness, the true nature of all dharmas. And like so many of the recorded occurrences of *avivartin* attainment, this anecdote recounts a spontaneous experience, which we infer is itself contingent on having a vast accumulation of merit.

5.2 *Avaivartika* bodhisattva: qualities and signs

Chapter 15 of the *Aṣṭa* (T224) "The Avivartin"¹¹⁹ is an exposition dedicated to answering the questions initially posed by Subhūti which are as follows: "How does the avivartin bodhisattva follow and how can they be seen pursuing? What are the signs? How does it come to be known that a bodhisattva is an avivartin?" (T224: 454b14-17)

In answer to Subhūti's inquiries, the Buddha gives an appraisal of an *avivartin* bodhisattva. Because the passage T224: 454b17-454c21 is verbose and repetitive I will provide only a synopsis account of these signs and qualities as follows:

The *avivartin* bodhisattva has reached the *dhyāna* that is unshakable, which is like space, which has as its basic nature nothingness. He does not engage in ritual activities such as offering flowers or incense at temples, praying to the heavens or

¹¹⁹ Karashima (2011: 303) names this chapter "Chapter on Attributes, Tokens and Signs of Irreversibility." This chapter equates with chapter 17 in the Sanskrit version. See Conze 1973: 200-208.

bowing before any śramaṇa. He is not born in an evil place or in a woman's form, observes the ten good deeds and teaches others to do likewise.

Then follows a further account of how an *avivartin* conducts the affairs of his life and in so doing inadvertently gives us a glimpse of society and market commerce at the time. This is in answer to Subhūti's inquiry as to why bodhisattvas are called *avivartin*. The following passage states:

Such bodhisattvas are not mixed up in the business of any raja or the world, of towns, cities, villages, hamlets and groups of people. Are not mixed up in the business of killing by thieves and robbers or armies and soldiers. Are not mixed up in the matters of men and women. Are not mixed up in the business of śreṇikas, their temples and sacrifices to all the yakṣas or in the business of wine, meat, corn and food. Are not mixed up in the business of perfumes and incense, painted silks; of grain and goods, of songs and plays. Are not mixed in the business of the seas and the things that come from it. Are not mixed up in the business of the vices and evils that return no good, opposes and deludes [delusions?] of men. But, is mixed up in the business of the deep prajñāpāramitā a heart that

never abandons, deserts sarvajñā, is always within it ... (T224: 455c6-455c13)

The Buddha further elaborates on the qualities of an *avivartin* bodhisattva in the excerpt T244: 454c03-454c21. Again, preferencing brevity over textual verbosity, a synopsis is as follows:

When hearing of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* an *avivartin* does not doubt, has no fear, delivers it with soft speech and a calm heart. He steps upon the ground gently and mindfully. His clothing is clean without fleas, lice or worms. His heart is clear and lucid beyond those of an *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha*. An *avivartin* holds deeply, without wavering, the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* and explains it to others. Such a one cannot be moved by Māra's many disguises and trickery.

Many additional references to the signs of an *avivartin* — all qualities pertaining to experiences in the dream state, are found in Chapter 18 of the *Aṣṭa* (T224: 459b10-28). Here a distinction is made between the true *avivartin* and those merely posturing as such. In summary, the true *avivartin* displays many attributes such as speaking the *sūtras* to many disciples as well as the ability to appear in different forms in many places. He sees the suffering of the three worlds in his dreams and wishes to become a Buddha to alleviate these ailments and extinguish other evils. The dialogue continues

in a way which very much addresses the deeds an *avivartin* performs as a Buddha for the benefit of others. In contrast to this, the sham *avivartin*, acting as if under the sway of a *yakṣa* or beguiled by Māra, thinks he has received an account, is bloated with pride and conceit and presents in every respect as the very antithesis of the true *avivartin*. Comparing the sham *avivartin* (one with faults) with the authentic *avivartin* (one with signs), the Buddha implores:

...compare faults with signs. Contrary, ... one [with faults] thinks: “I am an *avivartin* teaching [teacher?] so belittles other bodhisattvas. Because of this belittling, abandons Buddhahood; is far away from, abandons *sarvajñā*; ... abandons the wisdom of *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*; is far from *upāyakaśālyā*; has lost *prajñāpāramitā* ... (T224: 460c20-23)

... and so it is that the arhat and *pratyekabuddha* paths are followed ...

(T224: 460c28-29)

Stated succinctly, the fake *avivartin* bodhisattva has regressed.

5.3 Realizations of an *avaivartika* Bodhisattva

Whilst it is stated that bodhisattvas “...do not train in the srotapāṇna [*sic*], sakṛdāgāmin, anāgāmin or arhat or pratyekabuddha paths ...” (T224: 430b5-7), the following passage, appears to liken the realization of the *avaivartika* bodhisattva to that of an *arhat*. When Śāripūtra, Pūrṇamaitrāyanipūtra, Mahākoṣṭhila and Mahākātyāyana ask Subhūti:

“What causes the signs of prajñāpāramitā? From amidst which dharma does it come?” Subhūti said: “It comes from within the dharma of the avivartin bodhisattva. This causes the signs of prajñāpāramitā. So it is that all the men hear of the dharma, and are swift in becoming arhats.” (T224: 430a15-18)

The realization of an *avivartin* is additionally equated to the attainment of a *pratyekabuddha* in the following passage:

The Buddha said: “The avivartin bodhisattva has reached, obtained the dhyāna that is unshakable: like those of the arhat and pratyekabuddha ground ...” (T224: 454b17-18)

Although these lines equate the samādhi of an *avivartin* with that of an *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha*, according to the text, the *avivartin* does not enter the ground or path of an *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha* due to his *upayakauśalya*.¹²⁰ A distinction is made. Passage T224: 459b5-10 states that:

In dreams the bodhisattva mahāsattva does not enter arhat grounds, does not enter pratyekabuddha grounds, does not delight in his solitude. ...
Always know this to be the sign of the *avivartin*.

A brief reference to the emptiness¹²¹ attained by an *avivartin* is expressed in T224: 459a24 as, “The heart of the *avivartin* does not sunder what is known into numberless parts.” The text then couples this realization with the inevitable move towards *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, when, on reaching this state, a compassionate impulse arises to “speak the sūtras” because of others (T224: 459a7-8). This whole process, “...to take up having no thoughts, to take up having not wishing [no wish] for samadhi,

¹²⁰See passage T224: 459a10-12 cited below for an explanation of an *avivartin's upayakauśalya* in this text.

¹²¹ Translated by Giddings as dwelling in the “samādhi of space” and the “samādhi without any signs” which the text indicates as meaning a samādhi without thoughts. (T224: 459a4)

going towards the nirvana gate, to be upon the path but not to see it" is expressed as the *upāyakaśālyā* (T224: 459a10-12) of an *avivartin* bodhisattva.

Conze (2008: 234-236) notes that according to the *Daśa* and Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*, the *arhat* and the bodhisattva experience the "one emptiness" at a particular stage on a path. He observes that:

On the sixth stage the Bodhisattva has fully comprehended the wisdom teachings which reveal everywhere one 'emptiness'. At this point his position is equivalent to that of the Arhat in that no more need be 'done', and in that he could withdraw from the scene and enter Nirvana. His compassion, coequal with his wisdom prevents him however, from immediately taking this step and induces him to postpone entry into Nirvana. He spends the remaining *bhūmis* in the practice of 'skill in means', entirely devoted to the welfare of others.

The final comment in the passage above regarding "skill in means" appears to be a notion developed in later *Madhyamakāvatāra* literature although it is not clearly articulated as such by Conze.¹²² Whilst the *Daśa* enumerates a system of ten *bhūmis* it

¹²²The understanding of "skill in means" in the above passage is in stark contrast to this notion's explication in T224. However, *upāyakaśālyā* expressed as great compassion towards all beings, is

is questionable whether *upāyakaśālyā* is considered a concept solely “devoted to the welfare of others.” To conflate these two texts from very different periods and draw correspondences between the *śrāvaka* and *Mahāyāna* path development, as if it were a continuum, can be quite misleading.

These fleeting remarks provide no more than enigmatic passing references to the actual realization of an *avivartin*. Rather than rest in ambiguity, and in order to better understand this level of attainment, I will now turn to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*,¹²³ a text roughly contemporary with Lokakṣema’s *Aṣṭa* (T224).

Étienne Lamotte (2001), based on his understanding of sections of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, describes *avaivartika* in terms of a bodhisattva attaining certainty (*niyāma*) that dharmas do not arise (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*). A bodhisattva who achieves this *niyāma* is without regression. This is generally

included as a characteristic of the *avaivartin* bodhisattva in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*. The first extant recension of this *śāstra* by Kumārajīva could be two centuries prior to the *Madhyamakāvatara* and a century subsequent to Lokakṣema’s *Aṣṭa* (T224) which means that the base text could have existed roughly contemporaneously with Lokakṣema’s *Aṣṭa* (T224). However, both dating for this text and its attribution to Nāgārjuna are dubious. See additional notes below.

¹²³ The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, said to be a commentary on lines from the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, has been attributed to Nāgārjuna who is generally thought to have flourished ca. third century CE. However, this attribution was made by Kumārajīva who translated the *śāstra* into Chinese between 404-406 CE. Lamotte, who has provided a French translation of chapters 1-48, questions the traditional attribution to Nāgārjuna saying that it does not occur in the lists of works attributed to Nāgārjuna by the *Longshu pusa zhuan* 2047). See Zacchetti 2021 who is also sceptical of this attribution to Nāgārjuna.

attributed to the eighth stage, known as *acalā* which marks the beginning of the irreversible career toward Buddhahood. As it is stated in this *śāstra*:

Question. – What is the irreversible ground (*avaivartikabhūmi*)?

Answer. – 1. The bodhisattva considers unborn (*anutāpanna*), non-destroyed (*aniruddha*) neither unborn nor non-destroyed (*naivānutpannanāniruddha*), neither shared (*sāddhāraṇa*) nor unshared (*asādhāraṇa*) dharmas. Considering things thus, he is freed from the threefold world. Utilizing neither the empty (*śūnya*) nor the non-empty (*aśūnya*), he believes whole-heartedly in the wisdom of the True nature (*bhūtalakṣaṇa*) held by the Buddhas of the ten directions. Nothing can shake it or destroy it. It is called ‘conviction that dharmas do not arise’ (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*), and this conviction constitutes the irreversible ground. (Lamotte 2001, Vol. I: 1482)

A further explanation is given in answer to the question, “What must the bodhisattva obtain to receive the name of *avaivartika*?”

But in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, when the Bodhisattva possesses the practice of the six *pāramitās*, obtains *jñāna* and *upāya*, is no longer attached to the *pāramitās* which are absolutely empty, sees that all dharmas are without birth-cessation-increase-decrease, defilement, purity, coming-going-unity-multiplicity-permanence-impermanence-existence-nonexistence, without any dualities whatsoever; then, as a result of this *jñāna*, he sees and crushes any note of impermanence after having crushed any note of permanence; abandons the view of nonarising-cessation, the view of impermanence; is not attached to non-arising-cessation... he is called 'bodhisattva who has obtained the *anutpattikadharmakṣānti*,' he enters into the determination of bodhisattva, he is called *avaivartika*. (Lamotte 2001, Vol. I: 1484)

In addition to the attainment of *anutpattikadharmakṣānti*, the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, includes the element of great compassion (*mahākaruṇācitta*) towards all beings as a requisite for an *avaivartika* designation. According to Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224), there are passing references to a bodhisattva's compassionate action (T224: 459a7-8, T224: 459b26-27) on reaching

anuttarasamyaksambodhi, but not as a specific marker of *avaivartika*. According to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sāstra*:

By practicing the perfection of generosity (*dānapāramitā*) alone, the bodhisattva perfects (*paripūrayati*) the six perfections; the same [by practicing the other perfections] up to and including the perfection of wisdom. But by practicing the six virtues, the bodhisattva does not yet become *avaivartika*: it is at the moment when he produces a feeling of great compassion (*mahākaruṇācitta*) towards beings that he becomes *avaivartika*. (Lamotte 2001, Vol. I: 1485)

The passage goes on to provide a detailed explanation of the qualities that accompany entry into this fixed condition of a bodhisattva (*bodhisattva-niyāma*).

... the bodhisattva established on the irreversible ground obtains indestructible (*asaṃhārya*) and immutable (*acyuta*) superknowledges (*abhijñā*) from lifetime to lifetime. ...while grasping the True nature (*bhūtalakṣaṇa*) of dharmas, he uses his great compassion (*mahākaruṇa*) and does not abandon beings. Furthermore, the bodhisattva possesses

two attributes: i) pure wisdom (*viśuddhaprajñā*) ii) the wisdom of skilful means (*upāyajñāna*). He possesses two other attributes: iii) high resolve (*adhyāśaya*) directed towards nirvāṇa iv) activity (*kriyā*) that does not neglect the world (*loka*). ... Finally, the irreversible bodhisattva who acquired the wisdom of the True nature (*bhūtalakṣaṇa*) of dharmas retains it from one existence to the next without ever abandoning it, even temporarily. (Lamotte 2001, Vol. I: 1483)

According to this *śāstra*, the newly established bodhisattva, defined by the arousal of the first thought of the *bodhi* mind (*prathamacittotpāda*), is called an *avaivartika* bodhisattva on the first stage (*pramuditā*) although he is not endowed with the signs characteristic of *avaivartika* at this stage.¹²⁴ Lamotte (2001, Vol. I: 1484) then notes that the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* additionally presents the eighth stage (*acalā*) as marking *avaivartika* status, where a designation of *avaivartika* is based on the clear attainment of the conviction that dharmas do not arise/are not produced (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*).

¹²⁴ Lamotte maintains that, based on his understanding of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, a designation of “irreversible” at the first *bhūmi* is an incorrect understanding. Apple (2011: 122) notes that at this level, the bodhisattva, by virtue of the arousal of his bodhi mind, has an assurance of full awakening sometime in the future. This suggests that there is a possibility of regression as he has neither attained *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* or received a prediction.

In brief, Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) connects *avaivartika* status with bodhisattvas who have the realization of *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* and/or those who fearlessly accept, pursue and train in the wisdom of *prajñāpāramitā*. It is not clearly articulated in Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) whether a realization of *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* is always a prerequisite for the attribution of *avaivartika* status. Other bodhisattvas who were recipients of a prediction to Buddhahood but who might not have realized *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* were also recognized as *avivartins*. The *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, the extant text by Kumārajīva post-dating the *Aṣṭa* by a century, additionally includes the element of great compassion as a requisite achievement for the designation of *avaivartika* status.

5.4 Later uses of the term: *Avaivartika* as marking a stage on a systematized path

First, a consideration regarding the term "systematized" as used by scholars to refer to a "systemized bodhisattva path" and the stages which are said to constitute this path. As Gilks (2010: 155) reminds us, such concepts "... are foreign terms and show a Western historicist approach to Mahāyāna soteriology," an approach which would most likely differ markedly from the authorial community which produced these texts. Gilks (2010: 154) notes also that for orthodox scholars within the tradition, the bodhisattva path is not something that was systematized over time by exegetes

such as Nāgārjuna and Haribhadra but was actually taught by Maitreya in the *Abhisamāyālaṃkāra*. The second consideration concerns the term *bhūmi* (地) which over time¹²⁵ appears to take on an expanded meaning. Briefly, the *BHSD* (410c2-411c1) gives one meaning as a stage, state or condition, not necessarily on the spiritual path, whilst Conze refers to *bhūmi* as a level within a hierarchy of spiritual paths or as a sequential stage of development within a systematized path. I will now examine the term *bhūmi* as it pertains to the *avaivartika* notion in order to ascertain how it was initially used in the *Aṣṭa* (T224) and how in subsequent texts it took on an expanded meaning corresponding to Conze's definition of a stage within a path. I will then look at several additional texts¹²⁶ roughly contemporary with Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224), to examine how the stage of *avaivartika* is thought of as forming part of a path structure to be followed by bodhisattvas in their pursuit of Buddhahood.

5.4.1 *Avaivartika bhūmi* in Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224)

Giddings (2010 T224: 455a07, 12) translates the four Sinograms 惟越致地

¹²⁵ The idea that the *bhūmi* systemization took place over time as a linear development (Dutt 1978) is disputed by some scholars such as Hirakawa (1963). It is generally agreed however, that the *dāśabhūmis* grew out of the existing *śrāvaka* stages.

¹²⁶ Whilst it is not possible to investigate all of the textual sources pertaining to this subject – this would require a dedicated independent study, I have made a selection of several texts from this early period in which the notion of *bhūmi* shows a clear expansion and is progressively incorporated in a schema-like path structure.

as “*avivartin* ground” a term which appears to be used for an *avivartin* bodhisattva (T224: 455a12-14) who has arrived at irreversible ground, who displays particular indicators/signs of what was considered *avivartin* spiritual attainment. Used in this sense, *bhūmi* denotes a state with distinct characteristics. Nowhere in the *Aṣṭa* does it indicate a stage in a hierarchical series of stages on the path to Buddhahood. As noted previously, Lokakṣema’s *Aṣṭa* (T224) refers to Bodhisattvas of four different spiritual levels¹²⁷ where bodhisattvas are arranged according to a rudimentary progressive scheme, but it does not refer to these groupings as forming part of a *bhūmi* hierarchy. Where the term appears, for example in passages T224: 459b6, 465b27-28, it is not a notion referring to the *avivartin* person at a stage on a path, but specifically refers to and is compounded with the different soteriological options, as in the *bhūmi* of the *arhat* (*arhat bhūmi* 羅漢地) and the *bhūmi* of the *pratyekabuddha* (*pratyekabuddha bhūmi* 辟支佛地). So, in this latter context, *bhūmi* is used in the sense of a vehicle (*yāna*).

¹²⁷ Some scholars discount the fourth level, the *abhiṣeka* bodhisattva, and so recognize only three levels. Nattier (lecture one, “Stages of the Path: The Origins of the Bodhisattva Bhumis,” Tel Aviv University, 4:08:2010: <https://www.youtube.com/watch> Stages of the Path: The Origins of the Bodhisattva Bhumis) distills to only two types: the *avaivartin* and *non-avaivartin* bodhisattva.

5.4.2 *Avaivartika bhūmi* in the larger *Prajñāpāramitā* texts¹²⁸

The ten *bhūmi* system found in the longer *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, namely the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* and the *Śatasāhasrikā*, is systematically defined in the *Bhūmiparikarma* chapter of these texts (Gilks 2010: 162).¹²⁹ According to Gilks (2010: 162), although these *bhūmi* stages are not yet named, each stage specifies preparatory practices to be completed before progressing to the next stage. Lamotte (2001, Vol. V: 1970) concurs noting the following:

This chapter consists of two parts: the first part enumerates the ten
bhūmis and, for each of them, indicates the things to be practiced and the

¹²⁸ Some scholars, such as Conze (1975: ix, 1978: 31) refer to the larger *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* as if they were a single entity, and so name them/it the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* or the *Śatasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (Perfection of Wisdom in 100 000 lines). However, Conze states (1978: 10) that he has assembled into a single text, three different recensions: the 18 000 line (*Astādaśasāhasrikā*), the 25 000 line (*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*) and the 100 000 line (*Śatasāhasrikā*) *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*. Given this history, it is perhaps more accurate to describe this as a textual family where various texts make up a body of the longer *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. Zacchetti (2005: 42) argues that there are different lines of transmission or groups of texts which constitute the base texts out of which the so-called *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* grew, and this resulted in different recensions. Within the texts themselves, there appears to be evidence of stratification where various layers have been added over time. This makes it extremely problematic when attempting to draw conclusions about developments across texts in a linear fashion. See Zacchetti (2021: 17 ff.) for the complex history of the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā* text/s. It is outside the scope of this study to examine this in detail.

¹²⁹ Lamotte (2001, Vol. V: 1970) states that the ten *bhūmīs* are discussed in the *Mahāyānasamprasthāna* chapter of the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. A chapter by this title also occurs in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*.

things to be avoided; the second part repeats all of these things and comments on them. Nothing leads one to suspect that the commentary is a later addition. The chapter belongs solely to the Prajñā literature. It does not appear in the Aṣṭasāhasrikā but does appear in all the large P.P. sutras.

But, according to Dayal (1932: 272) “the *Śatasāhasrikā* fails to evolve an intelligible system ... and mentions the same virtues and sins again and again.”

Gilks (2010: 162) notes that in the larger *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, bodhisattvas become irreversible on the seventh level. Conze (1984: 164-165) passage 216-217, lists twenty dharmas to be fulfilled by a Bodhisattva on the seventh stage, one being “the patient acceptance of nonproduction,” another being “penetration into emptiness.” However, it does not specifically designate this stage as the “irreversible stage” in the list of avoidances, and fulfilments. The seventh stage is mentioned as the “irreversible stage” only in annotated notes (Conze 1984: 175 fnt. 47) where it states that:

From the seventh stage onwards, the stage from which no reversal is possible, he obtains the knowledge of all modes successively and by degrees.

5.4.3 *Avaivartika bhūmi* in the *Mahāvastu*

The *Mahāvastu* represents a very early version of the ten *bhūmi* (*daśabhūmi*) system in the *Daśabhūmi* chapter of this text.¹³⁰ The *bhūmi* path it presents is thought to be based on important events in the life of Śākyamuni Buddha as a bodhisattva¹³¹ but it also contains some prescriptive passages for bodhisattvas in general.¹³² Although there is some controversy regarding the *avaivartika* / *anivartiyā bhūmi*, it is thought to be an eighth stage achievement but it is not designated as such.¹³³ Dayal (1932: 275) supports this supposition noting that the eighth *bhūmi* called *Janma-nideśa* (Ascertainment of birth) denotes a stage of a bodhisattva which is “... perfectly pure

¹³⁰ See Jones 1949: 61 ff. for descriptions of each of the ten *bhūmis* as recorded in the *Mahāvastu*, Vol. I. v. 78-157.

¹³¹ The *Jātakas* relate four prominent events in Śākyamuni's career: 1) The prediction of Dipaṅkara, 2) the stage when he became irreversible, 3) the ascent into Tushita heaven, 4) the attainment of Buddhahood. It is thought that the *daśabhūmi* stages are based on these important events.

¹³² Gilks (2010: 163 fnt. 40) based on the study of Senart, proposes that the prescriptive passages could be an interpolation as several other passages in the *Mahāvastu*, (for example, see Jones 1949: 82) suggest later additions.

¹³³ The *Mahāvastu* (Jones 1949: 83) notes the eighth stage as *avaivartika bhūmi* although it is not designated as such in this *bhūmi* stage, only described as such in the fourth *bhūmi*. However, the *Mahāvastu* (Jones 1949: 100-108) places *avaivartika* attainment, here referred to as “Bodhisattvas who do not lapse” and “invincible” at seventh *bhūmi*. Lamotte's translation (2001, Vol. I: 1970) also places the *avaivartika bhūmi* at the seventh stage, where it is additionally named as *durjayā* (the invincible *bhūmi*). This disparity could be reconciled if the *avaivartika bhūmi* is thought of as a fluid attainment where moving into *avaivartika* status at seventh stage is consolidated at eighth *bhūmi*. Some scholars such as Conze (1978: 107-110) propose that the ten-*bhūmi* system in the *Mahāvastu* was an elaboration of a shorter list of seven successive stages of the *śrāvaka* tradition which culminated in *arhatship*. This agrees with the earlier findings of Dayal (1937).

and may be described as *avaivartika*.” The *Mahāvastu* also contains a bodhisattva path enumerated in four stages or *caryās*. The fourth or last of these *caryās* is said to be the *anivartanacaryā*, the irreversible stage.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ See Jones 1949: 1 fnt. 2 for the four stages of a Bodhisattva’s career. Here the *Mahāvastu* explains the fourth stage to be that of the *anivartanacaryā*, “where he is permanently set on the attainment of enlightenment without possibility of failing or turning back.” Of interest is that these *caryās* form the opening remarks in the Prologue of the *Mahāvastu* which could attest to the importance placed on the concept of a series of successive path attainments required of a Bodhisattva in his quest for Buddhahood.

5.4.4 *Avaivartika bhūmi* in the *Daśabhūmika-sūtra* (*Daśa*)

The *Daśa*¹³⁵ names the eighth stage (*acalā*) as the *avaivartika*/immovable *bhūmi*.¹³⁶ Dharmamitra's recension of this *sūtra* (2019: 15-16) outlines in the form of chapter subsections, the many characteristics which distinguish a bodhisattva at this *Immovability bhūmi*. These include sets of ten accomplishments, knowledges and powers, compassionate activities to teach/serve others, comprehension of *anutpattikadharmakṣānti*, and many figurative descriptions pertaining to the radiance

¹³⁵ There appears to be some disparity regarding this *sūtra*, its versions and chronologies. See Gilks 2010: 168 ff. for a comprehensive overview for its many translated versions. Gilks (2010: 171) notes that the *Daśabhūmika sūtra* formed the *Daśabhūmika* chapter in the *Avataṃsaka sūtra* which is also extant in Sanskrit title as *Daśabhūmiśvara*. It is sometimes referred to as a separate *sūtra*. See Lamotte 2001, Vol. 5: 1972 who includes T278 and T279 as chapters of the *Avataṃsaka*, whilst recording T285, T286, T287 as versions of a *Daśabhūmika-sūtra*. Gilks records five Chinese translations of this chapter, (Chun 1993: 132 numbers seven Chinese versions) which according to this schema, attributes T286, the earliest of these versions, to Kumārajīva (344-413 CE.). These are the *Daśa* versions I refer to when noting the *bhūmi* stage of *avaivartika* in the *Daśa*. According to Gilks (2010: 169–170), T278, T279, T281, T283, T284, T299 are versions of a different chapter in the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, the *Daśavyavasthāna* chapter. Here chronologies and attributions appear to disagree. Roberts (2022: i.15) and Chun (1993: 132) note that T283 was first translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa in the third century CE. whilst Gilks, in agreement with Nattier, (see Gilks 2010: 170 fnt. 72) records its attribution to Lokakṣema (fl. 168–189 CE.) Bhikṣu Dharmamitra (2019: 19) has a different schema for the six early Chinese translations where T283, translated by Dharmarakṣa, is dated as c. 297 CE., a dating similar to Roberts. Bhikṣu Dharmamitra's recent English translation triangulates the Chinese, English and Sanskrit versions providing a finished work referencing these different translation versions.

¹³⁶ Not to be confused with the *Daśabhūmikdeśacchedikā* (T309) which lists the seventh *bhūmi* as *avaivartika*. See Gilks 2010: 168–169.

of this stage bodhisattva. This system of *bhūmis* became the standard path classification in subsequent *śāstras* for aspiring bodhisattvas.

Dutt (1978: 88), in appraising the three texts above, concludes that the *bhūmi* system of the *Daśa* presents a more advanced conceptualization of the path and that the *bhūmis* of the larger *Prajñāpāramitās*, being of a more rudimentary formation, could represent a stage of development which lies midway between the *Mahāvastu* and the *Daśa*. Whilst this could be so, I would caution against such linear models of development especially in light of a remark by Lamotte (Vol.V. 2001: 1971) that the ten bodhisattva *bhūmis* in the *Mahāvastu* are named and explained referring to a *Daśabhūmika sūtra*. This highlights the complex development of this system with many source texts extant in a number of versions/editions. Dayal (1937: 270), in his research on the formation of the ten *bhūmi* system, found that in all three texts mentioned above, namely the *Śatasāhasrikā*, the *Mahāvastu* and the *Daśabhūmika sūtras*, the *bhūmi* systems as a stage on the path were built on existing spiritual accomplishments of the *śrāvaka* tradition.

5.4.5 *Avaivartika bhūmi* in the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi-sūtra* (*Śgs*)¹³⁷

I include the *Śgs* in this brief *bhūmi* developmental survey as it is roughly contemporary with the *Aṣṭa* and the above texts surveyed. The *Śgs* also mentions specific attainments of bodhisattvas at the *avaivartika* level. The *Śgs* (Lamotte 1998: 119) knows of the *daśabhūmi* system. Stanza 21 reads as follows:

Then the Buddha said to the bodhisattva Dr̥ḍhamati: The Śūraṅgamasamādhi is not obtained by the bodhisattvas of the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth stages (*bhūmi*); it is only the bodhisattva dwelling in the tenth *bhūmi* who can obtain this Śūraṅgamasamādhi.

Stanza 48.3 (1998: 141) of the *Śgs* then gives a description of the successive accomplishments of a bodhisattva, with *upāyakauśalya*, *anutpattikadharmakṣānti*, then *vyākaraṇa* being part of a *avaivartika*’s bodhisattva’s repertoire prior to or at the beginning of the eighth stage, the *niyatabhūmi* (“predestined stage”). In this text, these

¹³⁷ According to Lamotte (1998: 39), the *Śgs* was translated from an Indian source in 186 CE by Chih Ch’an (Lokakṣema) but this translation is lost. Several other Chinese translations were subsequently made in the third century but were also lost by the sixth century. See Lamotte 1998: 1 for details of these recensions. Lamotte uses as base text the Chinese translation by Kumārajīva, *Shuo-leng-yan san-mei jing* (T642), made sometime between 402 and 409 CE.

accomplishments are not correlated with particular stages until this stage. Of interest is that a prediction follows the attainment of non-arising of dharmas and that the triad mentioned includes *upāyakaśālyā*. Lamotte (1998: 143 fnt. 117, 118) indicates only that the six *pāramitās* are cultivated in the first to sixth *bhūmis*.

It is clear from the above brief survey of texts that the earliest *prajñāpāramitā* literature as represented by Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) does not place the *avaivartika* bodhisattva within a hierarchical stage of progress whilst other works such as the *Daśabhūmika sūtras* show this notion integrated in a clearly defined *daśabhūmi* system. It is difficult to assess whether these differing elucidations developed concurrently from independent textual traditions or whether the longer *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*¹³⁸ and the *Daśabhūmika sūtras* are chronologically later texts where a systemization of the *bhūmis* has taken place. Hirakawa (1963: 67) observed that "...the organization of the ten stages differ radically from each other" in early *daśabhūmi* systems and "... sees no grounds to posit a developmental sequence" from one text to another later text. For example, it cannot be shown that the *daśabhūmis* of the *Mahāvastu* form the basis for the system found in the *Daśabhūmika sūtras*.

Gilks (2010: 195 ff.) investigates this situation and proposes that the ten stages a bodhisattva traverses were formulated in a number of different phases which can be

¹³⁸ See Zacchetti 2021 for an overview of the complex historical development of the Larger *Prajñāpāramitā* body of texts.

detected in the longer *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. In the first stage, all gross defilements (*kleśa*) were eliminated. This corresponds to the *śrāvaka* path. In the second stage, with no *śrāvaka* parallel, the residues (*vāsanā*) of defilements were abandoned. It is at this stage, corresponding to the seventh or eighth *bhūmi*, that bodhisattvas become irreversible as it would have been impossible to revert to a *śrāvaka/pratyekabuddha* path when defilements up to this level had been obliterated.¹³⁹ Hence, in line with the supposition of Conze and Dayal, Gilks (2010: 197) argues that the *daśabhūmi* system grew out of the earlier *śrāvaka* tradition which “... resulted in the irreversible *bhūmi* becoming the seventh or eighth, depending on how the Hinayāna stages were enumerated.” Gilks goes on to explain that this elaboration would have come about in order to elucidate the more developed theory of *anuttarasamyaksaṃbodhi*, the goal of the bodhisattva that was unsurpassed, full enlightenment of a Buddha, superior in both knowledge and abandonments to that of the goal of *arhatship*.

¹³⁹ I note that the conclusions Gilks draws do not consider the factor of *upāyakaūśalya* in his understanding of the developmental *bhūmi* scheme he proposes, but only considers the abandonment of defilements as a determinant in traversing the *bhūmis* and reaching irreversible status. If the first thought of enlightenment includes a compassionate component for all beings, a component not present in their *śrāvaka* counterparts, the bodhisattva path would be differentiated from that of an *arhat* from the very beginning. That is, in the progression along the path, defilements would be abandoned together with the enhancement of a compassionate attitude which manifests on attainment of Buddhahood.

6. Prediction (*vyākaraṇa*)¹⁴⁰

As noted previously, a prediction to attain Buddhahood is closely linked to the status of *avaivartika* but is not always synonymous with this state. Prediction accounts form a recognizable literary trope with standard, almost ritualized elements.¹⁴¹

Fronsdal (1998: 256-257) notes:

Often, they begin with some person(s) worshipping the Buddha with a simple offering, often flowers, and then stating a spiritual intention or resolve (*praṇidhāna*). This is often followed by the Buddha smiling and emitting a coloured light from his mouth which illuminates much of the cosmos. The light then returns to the Buddha, circles him three times, and, when he is going to predict someone to Buddhahood, the light re-enters him through the crown of his head. Ānanda then asks for the meaning of the Buddha's smile. At this point the Buddha predicts the Buddhahood

¹⁴⁰ Gidding's translates *vyākṛta*/*vyākaraṇa* as "receiving an account" or otherwise it is textually referred to as "an anuttarasamyaksambuddha." See T224: 460b28 for one example of this. Conze (1973: 155) translates *vyākṛta* as "predestined."

¹⁴¹ See Fronsdal 1998: 252-255 for an overview of prediction in Buddhist literary works.

of the person(s) who gave the flowers by stating their future name as a Buddha.

Lamotte (1998: 181) in his annotated notes, explains the many different types of *vyākaraṇa* as outlined in the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*¹⁴² as follows:

1. Depending on the various individuals to whom it is addressed, the prediction is conferred: a. on an individual belonging to the lineage of the Tathagata; b. on a bodhisattva who has already aroused the thought of Bodhi; c. on a bodhisattva who is present; d. or finally, on a bodhisattva who is absent. 2. According to the various methods of predicting the time, we can distinguish: a. the prediction which fixes the time required for attaining supreme and perfect enlightenment; b. the prediction which does not fix it. 3. Again there are: a. the prediction having a bearing on Bodhi, that is, prophesying the attainment of Bodhi; b. the prediction having a bearing on the prediction, announcing that a Tathagata with such-and-such a name, at such-and-such a time, will

¹⁴² *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (Verses on the Ornament of the Mahāyana *sūtras*) is traditionally attributed to Maitreya-nātha, who is said to have transmitted it to Asaṅga ca. 320 to ca. 390 CE. In this text, appearing some hundred years post Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224), if dating on this text can be relied on, we note a major expansion and elaboration on the notion of prediction.

make such-and-such a prophecy. 4. Yet another is the Great Prediction: it is addressed to a Bodhisattva in the eighth stage who has acquired the certainty of the non-arising of dharmas, who has destroyed any feeling of pride making him say: 'I shall become a Buddha!', who has eliminated every object and every effort of thought, who has understood the fundamental sameness uniting him with all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas and who no longer see any distinction between their mental series and his own mental series. 5. The prediction which specifies the field and the rest, saying: 'In such-and-such a Buddha-field, the so-named, after so long, will become a Buddha, in the cosmic period of such-and-such a name; he will have such-and-such an entourage, and his Saddharma will last for such-and-such a length of time.'

The *Śgs* (Lamotte 1998: 179-182) presents a simpler typology of prediction. When the Buddha recounts the prediction of Māra Pāpīmat, Māra questions the validity of his prediction, on the grounds that her *anuttarasamyaksambodhicitta* (thought to reach Buddhahood) was not motivated by pure intention. By way of explanation, the Buddha in the following excerpt (Lamotte 1998: 179-182, § 100-101) relates four kinds of prediction:

1. The prediction concerning him who has not yet aroused the thought of Bodhi (*anutpāditabodhicittavyākaraṇa*).¹⁴³
2. The prediction conferred on him who has just aroused the thought of Bodhi (*utpāditabodhicittavyākaraṇa*).
3. The prediction made unbeknown to the one concerned (*rahovyākaraṇa*).
4. The prediction made in the presence of him who has acquired the certainty of the non-arising of dharmas (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti-labdhasaṃmukhavyākaraṇa*).

It is further stated that these four predictions can only be known by a *Tathāgata*; they are not recognized by *śrāvakas* and *Pratyekabuddhas*.

The first prediction in this list relates to Māra's inquiry and is further explained as the type of prediction which will take effect when *anutpāditabodhicitta* is aroused, thousands of *koṭīniyutas* of incalculable cosmic periods later. We understand from this that Māra has some time to go before actualizing his prediction.

¹⁴³ See Lamotte 1998: 189 where in the *Śgs* the Buddha names several bodhisattvas who have received a prediction without raising the thought of *bodhi* (*anutpāditacittavyākaraṇa*). The text does not correlate this prediction category with *avaivartika* status whilst category two, the *utpāditabodhicittavyākaraṇa* bodhisattva, is specifically named as achieving *avaivartikabhūmi*. See Lamotte 1998: 180 fnt. 2 for a fuller explanation of these four kinds of predicted bodhisattvas according to the *Śgs*.

6.1 Prediction and its relation to *avaivartika*.

The frequency with which the *Aṣṭa* (T224) discusses the notion of *avaivartika* and prediction to Buddhahood suggests that they were regarded as important issues by its author/s and by the received audience of the Buddhist community at the time. Fronsdal (1998: 250) makes the following observation regarding the reasons why such importance could be attached to receiving a prediction:

It is possible that during the earliest phase of the bodhisattva movement, the bodhisattva path was closely modelled on the past life stories of the bodhisattva career of Śākyamuni Buddha and in particular on the account of his prediction by Dipankara Buddha.¹⁴⁴ Since, as it seems, it was understood that Śākyamuni formally began the bodhisattva path when he expressed his resolve to, and received his prediction from, Dipankara, it would be natural for the early advocates of the bodhisattva ideal to see prediction as a crucial element in their conceptualization of the ideal.

¹⁴⁴ In Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) there are two references to this story: T224: 431a6-10, T224: 458b2-6. In Lokakṣema's translation of the *Akṣobhyavyūha-sūtra*, Akṣobhya's prediction is specifically said to be like the one granted by Dipaṃkara (T313: 753b15). Śākyamuni's prediction is also recounted in the *PraS*. See Harrison 1998: 77.

6.2 Prediction in the *Aṣṭa* (T224)

In Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) receiving a prediction is generally regarded as an indicator of avivartin status so they are often considered one and the same. An example of such passages which link *vyākaraṇa* and *avivartika* is:

The Buddha said: "Those bodhisattvas that hear this said, those whose hearts stir, have not received any account from the buddhas of the past, were never praised as a bodhisattva, were never in avivartin grounds ..."

(T224: 455a6-7)

The Buddha said: "If they [avivartin] cause a fire to be put-out, to become burnt out, has already done so and gone. They know Subhūti, that such a bodhisattva mahāsattva has already received an account, a Tathāgata, an Anuttarasamyaksambuddha in the past. (T224: 459c14-16)

Here Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) states that bodhisattvas claiming to be living recipients of such a prediction must have received it in a past life from a previous Buddha. Thus, one of the most important concerns in the text is how to recognize those

who have received a prediction to Buddhahood and those who have not.¹⁴⁵ Apple (2011: 127-128) proposes that:

It is likely that the extensive discussion in the Daoxing jing of how an irreversible bodhisattva is recognized is an expression of a need to verify people's status as predicted.

This process of authentication enabled the bodhisattva community to distinguish between true and false claimants of such a title (T224: 459c11-460b8). It is also likely that the differentiation between predicted and unpredicted bodhisattvas served as an indicator of a practitioner's position along the bodhisattva path, and more generally, would have represented a distinction in social status within the broader Buddhist community.¹⁴⁶

Whilst it is not clearly articulated, it appears that in the early textual production period, predicted bodhisattvas were thought to hold irreversible status.¹⁴⁷ However, it

¹⁴⁵ An interesting example of this divide is the reference, T224: 464b13-16, to "one with still far to go," fighting with "one with not so far to go," the latter understood as the irreversible bodhisattva.

¹⁴⁶ The *Aṣṭa*'s frequent discussion of the importance for an *avivartin*/predicted bodhisattva to avoid arrogance and deceit (see chapter 21 "Pride") could imply that these designations were held in high esteem.

¹⁴⁷ In *sūtra*/*śāstras* appearing later than Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224), the theme of prediction appears to have undergone development/expansion, with each text treating the topic in a more nuanced manner.

seems that not all *avaivartikas* were predicted. The first reference in Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224: 451a14-15) to the bodhisattva who "found the joy not born of any dharma" (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*) is that the thirty bodhisattvas who have attained this will receive their prediction to Buddhahood in this *bhadrakalpa*. From this we understand that bodhisattvas can attain this realization without and prior to receiving a prediction. However, in another passage (T224: 463a23-24), the attainment of *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* is equated with being predicted, further implying that such a bodhisattva is irreversible. (T224: 467c12-15)

The text depicts Subhūti as struggling with just these issues and so he questions the Buddha asking, "Is it that dharmas are born, come from nowhere, is this the receiving of an account of anuttarasamyaksambodhi?" (T224: 463a29)

The Buddha challenges his attempt at a conceptual comprehension using the transcendent logic of *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom (T224: 463a28-463b06), which implies that *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* and receiving an account of *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* are both illusionary in nature and nowhere to be ultimately found. Here we see a dialogue which weaves relative truth (*saṃvṛti*), things as they appear, with ultimate reality (*paramārtha*), things as they really are.

The issues of *avaivartika* and prediction receive further complex treatment in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra* (Lamotte 2001, Vol. I: 1482-1483) which states that there

are two kinds of *avaivartika*: the one who has obtained *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* and one who has not obtained *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* but has received a prediction from a Buddha. The text goes on to explain that the latter, who is an *avaivartika* but does not show the characteristics of *avaivartika* and could regress, seemingly a contradiction in terms. One possible understanding of this enigma is that whilst a prediction holds the assurance that Buddhahood will be the ultimate achievement for the holder of the prediction, a predicted bodhisattva could lapse on the way to reaching this final goal.

6.3 Prediction stories in the *Aṣṭa* and other early Mahāyāna *sūtras*.

Descriptive accounts of predictions found in Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) follow a simple, yet quite formulaic pattern, with some readjustment or embellishment of elements, but generally presented in the following way:

A bodhisattva declares his/her intent for Buddhahood, the Buddha responds with a smile which emits golden light from his mouth, the recipient offers a gift, often of flowers, whereupon a prediction is made that in a specified future aeon that person will be named such and such a Buddha. Quite often, included in the episode, is a flashback account of the person's previous life under a previous Buddha, when merit was accrued and the first thought to reach Buddhahood arose.

The following passages in the *Aṣṭa* (T224) contain three prediction stories. The first story (T224: 458a10-458b11) recounts the prediction of Gaṅgā upāsikā. This laywoman is seemingly inspired by a lengthy disquisition by the Buddha regarding bodhisattvas who unwaveringly pursue *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*. Right at the point when the Buddha mentions that thoughts are no longer bound in and by time, when “... thoughts turn just in an instant,” Gaṅgā arose from her seat and declared her fearless intent to pursue *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*. Golden light emanates from the Buddha’s smiling mouth whereupon Gaṅgā bestowed golden flowers on the Buddha which suspend aurally. A prediction is then made that the laywoman Gaṅgā will come into the world during the *Tāraḥpadma kalpa* as Suvarṇapuṣpa Buddha (Golden Flower) with the following qualities: she will in the future never have a woman’s body but will take a man’s form in the *kṣetra* of Akṣobhya Buddha, from whence she/he will go from one Buddha field to another. Gaṅgā upāsikā as Suvarṇapuṣpa Buddha, will lead unreckonable numbers of *arhats* to *parinirvāṇa*. This prediction episode is neatly concluded when the Buddha recounts the reason for this event; that Gaṅgā had in a former life, under Dīpaṃkara Buddha, stock-piled meritorious deeds and declared her intent to seek Buddhahood.

Here we understand that although a woman could receive a prediction, progress towards Buddhahood would require she take a male body in all future rebirths.¹⁴⁸ This prediction story illustrates the point that in some stories the gift offered to the Buddha corresponds to the name the predicted person will have as a Buddha in the future. In this instance, the laywoman Gaṅgā, who offered golden flowers to the Buddha, is predicted to become the Buddha Golden Flower.¹⁴⁹

The second account (T224: 468a29-468b10) is illustrative of all the standard elements which typify prediction tropes, so I will cite the passage in full.

At that time, trayastriṃśa devas above numbering ten million devas, took up magicked *māṇḍārava* flowers and strew them over the Buddha, after scattering then spoke. All the devas said: “We too will follow the dharma teaching set-out.” Then, one hundred and sixty bhikṣus sitting there arose, arranged their clothes and bowed towards the Buddha. After bowing, each one held in their hands magicked *māṇḍārava* flowers. Holding the flowers, they strew them over the Buddha. After strewing

¹⁴⁸ We find another reference to the female form as an obstacle to progress in the excerpt that expresses that “Those at home with wives see signs but the heart is not happy, joyful, always harbors feelings of fear and worry.” (T224: 455b20)

¹⁴⁹ See Strong 1979: 230 who notes several other instances of prediction stories where the gift offered corresponds to the Buddha-name the offeror is predicted to have in the future.

them they said: “We too will pursue the dharma teachings set-out.” Then the Buddha smiled. From within his mouth came many colours, their lights reaching out into Buddha kṣetras throughout the ten directions, illuminating them all. The lights returned, went around the Buddha three turns and came to enter the top of his head. Ānanda arose from his seat, arranged his clothing, knelt upon one knee and asked the Buddha: “The Buddha does not smile in haste, what idea makes you smile.” The Buddha told Ānanda: “These one hundred and sixty bhikṣu and all these devas will during the phala kalpa become buddhas, each with the same name - Avakīrṇakusuma (Flower Covered).”

Again, the gift of strewing *mandārava* flowers on the Buddha by the gods and monks, appears instrumental in determining their future predicted Buddha-name, *Avakīrṇakusuma* (Flower Covered).

The third account of a prediction in the passage T224: 477b11-15, is pithier and unceremoniously bestowed on Sadāprarudita by Dharmodgata Bodhisattva who in this instance represents all the Buddhas. We read:

At that time all the buddhas granted Sadāprarudita Bodhisattva this prophecy: “When you become a Buddha, you will in that future life make [be] a Buddha named Kāma-Katidha-Phalāya, Arhat, Anuttarasamyaksambuddha ... Then the five hundred women afterwards will gradually all become buddhas.”

The text goes on to relate the journey to Buddhahood of the women which began during the lifetime of Dharmodgata Bodhisattva and continued when they were magically transformed into men, always being born in a *buddhakṣetra* (T224: 477b16). Fronsdal (1998: 259) draws attention to gender bias in that included in a prediction, either stated or understood, is the guarantee that if the predicted person is a woman she will never be born as a woman again. On the other hand, if a man is predicted, there is no possibility of ever taking a future rebirth as a woman.

The following prediction story in the *Śgs* (Lamotte 1998: 191) follows very closely the more elaborate story outlined above in the *Aṣṭa* (T224: 468a29-468b10). Of particular interest is that the contenders for the title “recipient of prediction” are all women, daughters of the gods (*devakanyā*) who, without any sign of reticence, request that the Buddha make known their prediction status. Similar to other predicted

females, they are given a guarantee that their prediction will bring to an end any future rebirths in female form. Passage 110-112 recounts this event:

“Prediction Conferred on the Daughters of the Gods”

110. Then the devakanyās who had been won over (*vinīta*) by the bodhisattva Māragocarānupalīpta and who had aroused the *anuttarasamyaksambodhicitta* scattered celestial flowers (*dīvyapuṣpa*) over the Buddha and said to him: Bhagavat, we do not like the prediction conferred unbeknown to the one concerned (*rahovyākaraṇa*); we would like to obtain the prediction conferred in the presence of whoever has acquired the certainty of the non-arising of dharmas (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti-labdhasaṃmukhavyākaraṇa*).

We would like the Bhagavat to give us now that prediction with regard to *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*.

111. Thereupon the Buddha smiled (*smitam akaroṭ*): from his lips flashed forth rays (*arcis*) of various colours (*nānāvidhavarṇa*) which illuminated all the universes, returned to the Bhagavat and disappeared into his cranial protuberance (*uṣṇīṣe 'ntarhita*). Ananda asked: Bhagavat, for what reason are you smiling? The Buddha said to Ānanda: Do you see these two

hundred devakanyās who, with joined hands, are bowing down before the Tathagata? Yes, I see them, O Bhagavat.

112. [The Buddha went on]: Ānanda, those devakanyās in days gone by, in the presence of five hundred Buddhas, deeply planted good roots (*avaropitakuśalamūla*). Henceforth, they will pay homage (*pūjayiṣyanti*) to innumerable Buddhas and, at the end of seven hundred incalculable cosmic periods (*asaṃkhyeyakalpa*), they will become a Buddha with the name of Vyūharāja. Ānanda, those devakanyās, after their death (*marañakālakriyākāle*), will change their female bodies (*strīkāya*) and will all be reborn in the dwelling of the Tuṣita gods where they will pay homage to (*pūjayiṣyanti*) and serve (*upasthāpayiṣyanti*) the bodhisattva Maitreya.

In sum, although the prediction vignettes cited above do not specify *avaivartin* status in relation to the predicted recipients, it is clearly stated that these bodhisattvas will at some time in the future attain Buddhahood. We are left pondering. Do these predictions carry with them *avaivartin* status or is a lapse to a lesser *bhūmi* state or a fall to a *śrāvaka* or *pratyekabuddha yāna* a possibility for one holding such a prediction? In other words, could such a bodhisattva slip-up, falter and fall on his

predicted journey? Whilst the *Aṣṭa* appears to conflate both prediction and *avaivartika*, the *Śgs* in the passage cited above (Lamotte 1998: 179-182), theoretically clarifies this situation, stating that only those who have *utpāditabodhicittavyākaraṇa* (just aroused the thought of bodhi) as well as those attaining *anutpattikadharmakṣānti-labdhasaṃmukhavyākaraṇa* (the prediction made in the presence of one has acquired the certainty of the none-arising of dharmas) are *avaivartin*. In several of the prediction stories recounted above, notably Gaṅgā upāsikā and the *devakanyā*, these conditions appear to have been met, and so we understand that *avaivartin* status is immanent. If, however, a prediction account does not include this information, as in the case of Sadāprarudita's prediction, it is difficult to determine whether they stand on *avaivartin* ground or not.

7. *Avaivartika*: an exclusive club? Who reaches Buddhahood?

I now turn to consider the following question: is the term *avaivartika* associated exclusively with the Mahāyāna and the bodhisattva who, by adhering to its set of doctrines, traverses the path to Buddhahood accordingly? Gilks (2010: 41) notes that *avaivartika* and its derivative forms do not occur in the Pāli canon as a term used in connection with a bodhisattva on the path to Buddhahood, stating that “When a form of the word does occur, it tends to be used in a literal sense, for example in the *Kasī-*

bhāradvāja sutta where effort is likened to a yoked ox that takes one to *nirvāṇa* without ever turning back.”

We do however find the term used in several *sūtras* of Mahāsāṃghika¹⁵⁰ provenance. The *Ekottarika Āgama* (T125 no. 32.5)¹⁵¹ version of the Pali *Pavāraṇā-sutta* records the Buddha saying, “Among this assembly here, the most inferior on the lowest seat have/has attained the fruit of stream-entry and will definitely ascend to the state of non-regression” (Kuan 2013: 52). That the Mahāsāṃghika is associated with the concept of non-regression is further attested in a Sarvāstivāda¹⁵² text by Vasumitra,

¹⁵⁰ The Mahāsāṃghika school separated from the Sthaviravādas as the outcome of a schism resulting from either the first or second council of Vaiśālī soon after the Buddha’s death or as a schism resulting from the council thought to have been held at Pāṭaliputra, (the council at Pāṭaliputra convened under Aśoka is thought to be a separate council) mid-third century BCE. The council of Pāṭaliputra is especially interesting as the discord is cited as pertaining to the five points of doctrine where *arhats* are subject to regression. See Nattier and Prebish 1977: 237-272 for an overview of theories pertaining to the formation of the Mahāsāṃghika school.

¹⁵¹ *Sūtra* five in chapter thirty-two of the *Ekottarika Āgama* (*Zengyi ahanjing* T125). There is much scholarly consensus that this *āgama* belongs to the Mahāsāṃghikas. See Kuan 2013: 51. See Anālayo 2018 “An Ekottarika-āgama Discourse Without Parallels: From Perception of Impermanence to the Pure Land” fnt. 10 for alternatives.

¹⁵² The Sarvāstivāda school most likely split from the Sthaviravāda during the reign of Aśoka after doctrinal disagreements about the nature of reality, maintaining that all dharmas have true existence (*sarva-asti*). This school developed a version of the *Abhidharma* preserved in Pāli as the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. Splits within the Sarvāstivāda sometime during the first century BCE. resulted in the Sautrāntika, Dārṣṭāntika and Saṅkrāntika subschools existing alongside the “orthodox” Sarvāstivāda school and its offshoot, the Mūlasarvāstivāda. See Willemen, Dessein and Cox 1998 for the development of early Buddhist sectarianism and Sarvāstivāda scholasticism.

the *Buzhiyi lun* (T2033)¹⁵³ which expounds schisms and doctrines of various schools. In its presentation, one tenet of the Mahāsāṃghika school states: “A stream-enterer is subject to regression; arhatship is not subject to regression” (Kuan 2013: 52).¹⁵⁴ Whilst five versions of the *Pravāraṇā sūtra/Pavāraṇā suttas* speak of different levels of *arhats*,¹⁵⁵ they do not attribute irreversibility to the “fully-fledged” variant¹⁵⁶ nor do they mention the *arhat* who is “liberated by wisdom” as susceptible to regression. The only complete version of the *Pavāraṇā sutta* in Pali, is the seventh *sutta* in the eighth *saṃyutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya* (8.7) belonging to the Theravāda school. According to this text, *arhats* are considered to be free of all taints. Following from this, the

¹⁵³ The *Samayabhedoparacanacakra-sūtra*.

¹⁵⁴ Warder (1970: 288-289) states that the Sthaviravāda also held the view that an *arhat* cannot relapse, a view contrary to that held by the Mahāsāṃghikas, who thought that an *arhat*'s perfection was not so absolute. Warder also notes that a third school, which seceded around the same time, the Dharmaguptaka, held a similar view as the Sthaviravāda in that an *arhat* had perfected the path and could not relapse.

¹⁵⁵ Kuan (2013: 57-58) claims that four of the Āgami *Pravāraṇā sūtras* and the one parallel Theravāda Pali *sutta* are most likely affiliated to the Sthaviravāda lineage, the Āgami translations being of Mūla-Sarvastivāda affiliation. Kuan also claims that that these different levels of *arhats* are a later interpolation in these texts.

¹⁵⁶ “Fully-fledged” or highest-level *arhats* are in these texts said to be “liberated in both ways” with experience of all of the nine attainments in concentrative meditation (i.e. the four *dhyānas*, the four formless attainments and the cessation of perception and feeling) whilst the *arhat* who is “liberated by wisdom” only, is thought to possess none or only some of the *dhyānas* and formless emancipations depending on which *sutta/sūtra* is considered authoritative. According to Kuan (2013: 63) the Pali *Abhidhamma* states that an *arhat* “liberated by wisdom” lacks all concentrative attainments including the *dhyānas*.

unstated corollary would be that an *arhat* would not be subject to regression. The Pali *Kiṭāgiri sutta* also speaks of *arhats* “liberated in both ways” as well as “liberated by wisdom”. Regarding the former type, Wynne (2002: 37) proposes that:

... the list of spiritual types found in the *Kiṭāgiri sutta*,¹⁵⁷ or at least the highest types in its hierarchy, was formulated by those early Buddhists who advocated formless meditation as a path to liberation.

But Kuan (2013: 64-65) believes that the notion of an *arhat*, “liberated in both ways,” appears to be a later scholastic development in order to establish superiority for this type of *arhat*, at a time when “liberation of wisdom’ had lowered the threshold for the qualification of *arhatship*.

Another Mahāsāṃghika affiliated text,¹⁵⁸ the *Mahāvastu*, also mentions non-regression and its related counterparts. As I have previously commented on the use of *avaivartika* in this text, I will tailor my thoughts to look briefly at its negative equivalent, *vartatī*. In the *bhūmi* descriptions mentioned, as well as the bodhisattvas who do not turn back (*vivartantī*), we find an even greater preponderance on the *vartatī* bodhisattva, one who has regressed/lapsed. According to *bhūmi* sections

¹⁵⁷ *Majjhima Nikāya* I 477.

¹⁵⁸ A text belonging to the Lokottaravāda branch of the Mahāsāṃghika.

second to eighth (Senart 1882 Vol. I: 84-139; Jones 1949 Vol. I: 66-110) one inadvertently becomes a *vartatī* bodhisattva if, for example, on the second *bhūmi* there has been a lapse in any of twenty-eight different ways which would prevent progress to the third *bhūmi*. In a similar manner, a third *bhūmi* bodhisattva can lapse in fourteen different ways and so fail to reach the fourth *bhūmi*. And so on through each *bhūmi* where each successive level up to seventh is associated with fewer enumerated faults. The general sense is that a bodhisattva can abide on a *bhūmi* but due to falling victim to a specified fault/s, fails to progress to the successive *bhūmi*.¹⁵⁹ So, according to this model, a bodhisattva who lapses does not fall to a lower level, he merely fails to advance. The *Mahāvastu* is unclear as to the exact irreversible stage. Whilst no specific “lapsing” faults are enumerated at the seventh *bhūmi*, it is stated that a bodhisattva, in advancing to the eighth stage, is truly irreversible¹⁶⁰ which would mean, if we take into consideration the blueprint for lapsing as just described, it is only at this level that there is no hindrance caused by a lapse. In other words, having arrived at eighth stage ground, there is no possibility of a lapse which would prevent a bodhisattva from

¹⁵⁹ See Jones, 1949 Vol. I: 70 fnt. 2 for a further explanation of the ‘lapsing’ bodhisattva in the *bhūmi* development stages according to the *Mahāvastu*.

¹⁶⁰ Jones (1949: 83) records that this state of irreversibility as found in § 105 of the *Mahāvastu*, and included as a fourth *bhūmi* descriptor, states that: “From the eighth *bhūmi* onwards, O son of the Conqueror, Bodhisattvas are to be looked upon as perfect Buddhas. For after that they do not lapse.”

traversing the remaining stages and attaining full and perfect Buddhahood. He is irreversible in that he cannot turn back from full enlightenment.

There is also mention of the concept of irreversible in the *Abhidharma* literature of the Sarvāstivāda school¹⁶¹ but in the context of a bodhisattva, which accords the status of irreversible to all bodhisattvas who have aroused the thought of unsurpassed complete enlightenment (Gilks 2010: 42-43). This infers that the “first thought of enlightenment” is not susceptible to reversal and that a bodhisattva at this level is not capable of turning back. So, bodhisattvas are associated with *avaivartika* in this early textual usage. Drews (2021: 146) notes that according to *nikāya* traditions, including present day Theravāda:

For ancient Buddhists however, ... becoming a bodhisattva was not something one could simply decide to do. According to the oldest known understanding, one becomes a bodhisattva by making a resolution to attain Buddhahood in the presence of a living Buddha and receiving his prediction that one will succeed.

¹⁶¹ This is recorded in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (T1545: 886c29-887a01).

So, the bodhisattva path, in particular irreversibility, in this doctrinal context, is contingent on being in the presence of a living Buddha and having received a prediction. As noted previously, this doctrinal stance has as its basis, Śākyamuni's prediction of Buddhahood whilst a bodhisattva.

In sum, the notion of *avaivartika* receives scant attention in *śrāvaka* literature. Where it is mentioned, it appears in the context of a bodhisattva and accompanies an unshakable conviction to achieve Buddhahood, a conviction which is rendered as irreversible. This conviction could only be aroused in the presence of a living Buddha who then confers a prediction on the aspirant as in the case of Gautama Buddha. The lack of attention to irreversibility is understandable considering that the bodhisattva ideal, as an achievable soteriological option, does not appear in Chinese texts as a distinct literary concept until the translated works of Lokakṣema (Fronsdal 1998: 105), although these works invariably point to an earlier Indic literary existence. There is much debate however as to fixing a time when a bodhisattva metamorphosed into and stabilized as a "bodhisattva ideal."¹⁶²

¹⁶² The Pāli *suttas* use the term "bodhisatta" in a limited sense to refer primarily to Gautama Siddhārtha (as well as to all previous Buddhas) in the lifetimes prior to his historically recorded enlightenment. Over time, this bodhisattva idea became idealized (bodhisattva ideal) as it was formulated into a path-like structure open to any being wishing to pursue Buddhahood as the final goal. Some scholars tentatively argue for a date as early as third century BCE. for the development of the bodhisattva ideal. See Pagel 1995: 34, Basham 1981: 23, Dayal 1932: 44. An alternate understanding (De 1951: 1) is that the bodhisattva gradually evolved as an ideal in Pāli literature from the various *nikāyas*, and that this

7.1 Disenfranchised? *Śrāvakas*, *Pratyekabuddhas* and *Arhats*. Where do they stand in relation to *avaivartika*?

I will now examine a selection of early Mahāyāna literature in order to consider how the *yānas* of the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* were represented in these texts. In doing so I will attempt to answer the following questions: Did the emerging bodhisattva ideal with its accompanying ideologies and practices exclude their *śrāvaka* counterparts? Or was the new soteriology simply a continuation and expansion of existing ideas in which case open participation was extended and accessible to all? Harrison (1987: 84-85) notes the following:

... what they [the texts] do tell us is that the early adherents of the Bodhisattvayāna – who were probably very much in the minority – were prepared to go to great lengths to uphold their ideal against what they conceived to be the traditional goal of Buddhist practice, namely arhatship or *nirvāṇa* for oneself alone, but they were not prepared to write off the rest of the Buddhist *saṅgha* or sever their own connection with it.

development took place up until the fifth century CE. See Anālayo 2010 for a comprehensive overview of the development of the bodhisattva ideal.

Deleanu (1999: 81) agrees with Harrison noting that “... the new agenda is [was] not carried out at the expense of completely denying the old tradition.”

This then inferred that early bodhisattvas did not have a perception of themselves as a segregated category. At this early stage, the distinction appeared to be nothing more than a different perception of the goal of religious life.

We note that in many of the early Mahāyāna *sūtras*, the great *śrāvakas* and the *bhikṣus* who were *arhats* make up the audience. For example, Subhūti¹⁶³ is one of the fore-most interlocutors in the *Aṣṭa* and a much-revered member of a sangha predominantly made up of bodhisattvas. Hence, it appears that in these early texts, the *śrāvaka* ideal is usually depicted as peacefully co-existing with bodhisattvas.

This idea of the *bodhisattvayāna* as an extension of the existing *śrāvaka* tradition, or presented as part of a continuum, is evident in the *Aṣṭa* (T224) where passages present the wisdom of *prajñāpāramitā* as pervading all levels, from lowest through to highest attainment of Buddhahood. In this instance, a common factor, here the wisdom of emptiness, is presented in such a way that it overrides any *yāna* distinctions. For example, in answer to Kauśika’s inquiry of how a bodhisattva dwells within *prajñāpāramitā*, Subhūti replies:

¹⁶³ Subhūti is/was considered an *arhat* and one of the ten foremost disciples of the Buddha.

...rūpas are not dwelt within; vedanā, saṃjñā, saṃskāra or vijñāna are not dwelt within; the srotapāṇna [*sic*] is not dwelt within; the sakṛdāgāmin is not dwelt within; the anāgāmin is not dwelt within; the arhat is not dwelt within; the pratyekabuddha is not dwelt within; the buddha is not dwelt within. (T224: 429b7-10)

Everything comes from training in prajñāpāramitā, the finding of sarvajñā which is the completion of the power of dharma. Because of this, buddhahood is found, the srotapāṇna [*sic*] path, sakṛdāgāmin path, anāgāmin path, arhat path and the pratyekabuddha path are created. (T224: 437b13-15)

Whilst passages in the *Aṣṭa* record *śrāvaka bhikṣus* as members of the audience and actually attaining various realizations in response to the Buddha's discourse on *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom, it is noteworthy that bodhisattvas only are named as the recipients of *avaivartika* status due to their realization of the "joy not born of any dharma." We read that:

When the Buddha spoke this sūtra, in [the] bhikṣu saṃgha were five hundred bhikṣus and thirty bhikṣuṇīs who became arhats; sixty upāsakas and thirty upāsikas [*sic*] who found the srotapāṇna [*sic*] path; thirty bodhisattvas who found the joy not born of any dharma. (T224: 451a12-15)

However, the passage above further recounts that all of the above-mentioned attainment recipients would receive a prediction during the *bhadrakalpa* age, perhaps an example of an equal opportunity milieu in which the path to Buddhahood is offered to whomever ventured to hear the great *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*.

The following passage in the *Aṣṭa* suggests that *prajñāpāramitā* was presented to followers of all *yānas*, that its message was so profound that whoever heard it, irrespective of path affiliation, would follow it. Whether this implied that there was some fluidity across paths, that an upward migration to the bodhisattva path was possible as a result of this *prajñāpāramitā* training, is unclear.¹⁶⁴ For we read:

Those desiring to train in arhat dharmas will, upon hearing of prajñāpāramitā begin to train, uphold and maintain it. Those desiring to

¹⁶⁴ An alternate reading could be that on hearing *prajñāpāramitā* the path one is pursuing would be enhanced.

train in *pratyekabuddha* dharmas will, upon hearing of *prajñāpāramitā* begin to train, uphold and maintain it. Those desiring to train in *bodhisattva* dharmas will, upon hearing of *prajñāpāramitā* begin to train uphold and maintain it. (T224: 426a06-09)

Other passages of the *Aṣṭa* proclaim that the *bodhisattva* path only is the exclusive domain of Buddhahood and that it cannot be accessed via *arhat* and *pratyekabuddha* paths. The text states:

One that pursues *prajñāpāramitā*, apart from the grounds [of the] *Buddha* path, [that is] the grounds of the *arhat* and *pratyekabuddha* paths, do [does] not reach the grounds of this *bodhisattva* path. (T224: 468a26-28)

Whilst the translation is not entirely clear, it appears to support the idea that one following the *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha* path, even if hearing *prajñāpāramitā*, would not be able to access the path of the *bodhisattva*.¹⁶⁵ This in turn suggests that particular features of the “*bodhisattva* ideal” yield the fruits of Buddhahood.

¹⁶⁵ However, the *Aṣṭa* (T224: 438c9-17) also implies that if a being has sufficient merit, anyone from *śrāvaka* down to ordinary man can finally train in the *bodhisattva* path and attain

Before turning to these unique features, it is worth noting that we find many instances of rhetorical attacks on *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddhas*, in an attempt to present the bodhisattva ideal as universally superior to the aspirants of other paths.¹⁶⁶ For example, in the *Aṣṭa* (T224: 427b1-6) one such attack is disguised as the work of Māra and harmful teachers:

Subhūti said: “How is a master harmful to a bodhisattva?” ...The Buddha said: “They teach others to cast aside, desert and abandon the bodhisattva heart...If the dharma paths of the arhat and pratyekabuddha are taught, trained and eagerly recited, then this is said to be Māra’s work. Māra’s aim is to ruin the bodhisattva... by saying the bodhisattva path cannot be found.”

anuttarasamyaksambodhi, if the merit is dedicated to this end. According to my understanding of this passage, the bodhisattva path before an initial vow, is flexible and open to anyone depending on the type and amount of merit accumulated and if it is dedicated for full enlightenment. In other words, before an initial wish, the particular path an aspirant is to travel has not been fixed. However, the Buddha, in dialogue with Subhūti, states that “...few people will come from amongst the many arhats and pratyekabuddhas to follow the training taught in the prajñāpāramitā method.” (T224: 465a22-23)

¹⁶⁶ There are clearly some exceptions to this “superiority model” in early Mahāyāna scriptures as Harrison (1987: 83-4) points out. One example is shown in the *Akṣobhyatathāgatasyavyūha-sūtra* which depicts the *śrāvaka* as happily sharing Akṣobhya’s Pure Land with the bodhisattva.

The bodhisattva path is also presented as a superior path in that there are repeated warnings against intentionally or inadvertently falling back or regressing to the lesser path of the *arhat*, *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* and the fear which could accompany such a retrograde step. The *Aṣṭa* (T224) declares:

Because they choose the methods of other sūtras [they] will soon stray into the grounds of the śrāvaka and pratyekabuddha paths. (T224: 447a14)

Or the *Aṣṭa* offers the assurance that:

As an account will be received before long they [bodhisattva mahāsattva] do not fear falling into the arhat and pratyekabuddha paths. For what reason? In their heads are thought of hearing, seeing, finding the deep prajñāpāramitā. (T224: 445b3-4)

That such a bodhisattva must not aspire to the goals of an *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha* and so prematurely enter *nirvāṇa* is expressed in the following passages:

Bodhisattva mahāsattvas must awake, know of Māra's works.

Furthermore, Subhūti, whenever Māra acts, whenever Māra's work arise[s] it leads to sinking into a śrāvaka to find the srotapāṇna [*sic*] path.

(T224: 448b25-27)

For, a bodhisattva, standing firm in his convictions, does not even contemplate lesser goals, even in his dreams. The Buddha said:

Subhūti, in dreams the bodhisattva mahāsattva does not enter arhat grounds, does not enter pratyekabuddha grounds, does not delight in his solitude, nor teaches others to enter into these. (T244: 459b5-7)

Why do we find repeated warnings cautioning the bodhisattva from entering perceived lower grounds? Why was the *bodhisattvayāna* considered a superior vehicle? What were the unique features which doctrinally distinguished the bodhisattva path from their *śrāvaka* counterparts, features which led to full complete enlightenment (*anuttarasamyaksambodhi*)? The *Aṣṭa* goes some way in offering an explanation in the following:

If a bodhisattva that has joy and faith is certain and pursues with vigor the desire to reach *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* does not find the deep *prajñāpāramitā* does not train in any *upāyakaśālya*, such a bodhisattva cannot reach *sarvajñā*: will give up on the path, turn back, and sink into the *arhat* and *pratyekabuddha* paths.¹⁶⁷ (T224: 451c19-c22)

If the deep *prajñāpāramitā* is found and a *upāyakaśālya* is trained in, such a bodhisattva does not laze idly on the path; goes beyond the *arhat* and *pratyekabuddha* paths. (T224:451c15—16)

Here the above passages clearly present two factors considered essential for one wishing to pursue perfect, complete enlightenment; namely, the finding and dwelling in *prajñāpāramitā* and the training in *upāyakaśālya*, factors which if absent will result in the lesser paths of an *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha*.

Regarding the wisdom of *prajñāpāramitā* the *Aṣṭa* states:

¹⁶⁷ Additional passages such as T224: 452a18-21 present many similes of a bodhisattva with all the right virtues of joy, faith, vigor in training and deep aspiration for *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, but does not find or pursue *prajñāpāramitā*, then this bodhisattva will regress to the paths of an *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha*.

This is the bodhisattva[s] pursuit of *prajñāpāramitā*. ... their *samādhi* has no bounds, has no base: something which no arhat or pratyekabuddha can ever reach. (T224:426a29-b2)

... samadhi is nothing that is ultimate, there is nothing to show. No arhat or pratyekabuddha can ever reach this knowledge. (T224: 426c19-20)

The *samādhi* these excerpts are referencing is clearly the wisdom of emptiness, that all dharmas including the *samādhi* of *prajñāpāramitā* itself are empty of any self-existent entity. It is presented here as a superior attainment which is beyond the scope of any *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha*. If this is so, we are left to grapple with the seemingly contradictory notion which follows, namely that the *avaivartika* bodhisattva dwelling in *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom, is said to have the same level of understanding or realization of an *arhat* and *pratyekabuddha*.

The Buddha said: “The avivartin bodhisattva has reached, obtained the dhyāna that is unshakable: like those of the arhat and pratyekabuddha grounds...” (T224: 454b17-18)

One way of possibly reconciling these opposing viewpoints is that from the philosophical standpoint of *prajñāpāramitā* literature, all designated levels of attainment, from *śrotāpanna* to Buddhahood, are pervaded by the same “suchness” (*tathātā*) which all spring from *prajñāpāramitā* (T224: 450a4-8, 451a17-24).¹⁶⁸ Consequently, bodhisattvas do not think of themselves as being far from the attainments of *arhats* and *pratyekabuddhas* (T224: 466b29-c1).

The second factor, purported to lead to full enlightenment, *upāyakaśālyā*, is not so clearly explicated. We find in the *Aṣṭa* (T224) that this term is often compounded with *prajñāpāramitā* as in *prajñāpāramitā upāyakaśālyā* (T224: 452a10, 452a18, 452a21-22, 453c5)¹⁶⁹ or intrinsically linked with *prajñāpāramitā* as in the following:

Bodhisattva mahāsattvas all come from the upāyakaśālyā of
prajñāpāramitā. (T224: 433c7-8)

¹⁶⁸ See passage T224: 430a7-9. “I [Subhūti] say that the *śrotāpanna* [*śīc*] *sakṛdāgām*, *anāgāmin*, *arhat*, *pratyekabuddha* and *Buddha* paths are all illusions.” This is another reference to suchness pervading all levels because of the illusionary nature of all dharmas.

¹⁶⁹ There are numerous such examples of this compounded use throughout the text.

What is this upāyakauśalya? From prajñāpāramitā within comes this upāyakauśalya. (T224: 465a8-9)

That the wisdom of *prajñāpāramitā* is inseparable from *upāyakauśalya* is stated as:

Those bodhisattvas that seek the deep prajñāpāramitā if it is grasped, this is upāyakauśalya. (T224: 457a2)

The bodhisattva in his heart thinks to himself, this is to find the upāyakauśalya, to take up space, to take up having no thoughts, to take up having not wishing for samādhi, going towards the nirvana gate, to be upon the path but not to see it. (T224:459a10-12)

According to the *Aṣṭa* (T224) this *upāyakauśalya* is not found in the *śrāvaka* path.

This is implied in the following:

...those that cannot, who give up and walk away from *prajñāpāramitā* deny it, searching within the śrāvaka path for an *upāyakaśālya*. ...

Subhūti said: ‘such actions are not shrewd’. (T224:447c19-22)

Those bodhisattvas that have not found a *prajñāpāramitā upāyakaśālya* have entered upon a path that becomes the arhat path, there is no return.

(T224: 453c7-8)

Whilst *upāyakaśālya* is referenced many times, we are not given much explicit information in Lokakṣema’s *Aṣṭa* (T224) as to how it relates to *prajñāpāramitā* or how it manifests in the behavior of a bodhisattva/Buddha.

Chapter four of the *Aṣṭa* (T224) is titled *Upāyakaśālya*, although the term itself is not often directly referenced. In this context *upāyakaśālya* takes on the general meaning of delighting/rejoicing (勸助) and the skilful dedication of the resulting merit towards full enlightenment.

Based on Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation of the *Aṣṭa* (T227), a later accreted version,¹⁷⁰ de Breet (1992: 206) proposes this understanding of the term, especially as it is used in chapter twenty. de Breet states that *upāyakaśālya* is:

¹⁷⁰ Kumārajīva’s *Aṣṭa* (T227) dates to 408 CE. See Lethcoe 1971.

... the skill to apply the method [of salvation, the mysticism of voidness] in such a way that one does not reach Nirvāṇa before having become a Buddha oneself and thus being able to lead others to liberation. ... To be precise: it is not the compassion itself but it is the [skill in the] balancing act between entering emptiness and not deserting the world with its suffering beings.

Nattier (2003: 155) explains that in the early phases of the *Aṣṭa*, for example Lokakṣema's T224 version, the "skillful" as in "skillful-means" (*upāyakauśalya*) meant that Bodhisattvas developed the ability to dwell in deep states of meditative absorption whilst able to avoid the destiny of *nirvāṇa* of an *arhat* or *siddhis* resulting from the *dhyānas*. This understanding is expressed in the passage T224: 465a9-10 which states:

[To] take up this upāyakauśalya is to end those dhyānas that lead to becoming a long-life deva nor to follow after any dhyāna dharmas.

This preponderance on the utmost importance of not dwelling in the *nirvāṇa* of an *arhat* is expressed in the following excerpt which states that when Buddhahood is the final goal, its attainment is accompanied by great compassion. For we read:

...those that reach the highest end, find a compassion that nothing else can reach. (T224: 462b18-19)

... the bodhisattva heart has no equal, a heart that no other can reach; a heart that no arhat or pratyekabuddha can approach. (T224: 427b23-24)

Bodhisattvas that train like this are skilled in method. Bodhisattvas that train like this are supreme in great compassion... Bodhisattvas training like this train to carry to nirvāṇa all beings everywhere in the ten directions. (T224: 464c22-25)¹⁷¹

Based on these textual accounts, a summary understanding of the compounded term *prajñāpāramitā upāyakaśālyā*, although not explicitly stated, appears to suggest that a realization of the wisdom of emptiness of all dharmas (self and phenomena)

¹⁷¹ These passages are referring to the bodhisattva “mahāsattva,” a bodhisattva who through the training has or will attain Buddhahood.

through “finding” *prajñāpāramitā* is accompanied by *upāyakaśalya*. The usage of the term in this context appears to refer to the “touching” of nirvana, then having the skill to move on, the impetus being a latent form of great compassion,¹⁷² a seed which germinates and manifests as such in the final state of Buddhahood. So ultimately, the liberation of all beings is contingent on a bodhisattva’s path to Buddhahood where and when compassionate activities manifest.¹⁷³ Doctrinally, this makes the bodhisattva path superior to any *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha* or *arhat* path as it has the capacity to liberate other beings.¹⁷⁴

In sum, according to the Lokakṣema’s *Aṣṭa* (T224) Buddhahood was only open to those who trained in and attained the wisdom of *prajñāpāramitā*, a notion repeated with almost formulaic regularity.¹⁷⁵ Textual accounts record that audiences for the

¹⁷² As embodied in the initial thought of *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*.

¹⁷³ For example see passage 427c4-6 of the *Aṣṭa* where the Buddha is recorded as saying: “A bodhisattva mahāsattva in his heart thinks this way: I will ferry over countless asaṃkhyeyas of people, lead them to parinirvāṇa.” Similar lines are repeated refrain-like in passage T224: 429c9-11. Here a bodhisattva mahāsattva is explained as training to have the same omniscient qualities of a Buddha. There are also references (T224: 437b24 ff.) to the *avaivartin* bodhisattva mahāsattva taking up *prajñāpāramitā* and explaining and sharing it with those who have raised the thought of *anuttarasamyaksambodhi*. However, at this stage on the path, this altruism is explained as a meritorious act, not as the manifestation of a compassionate attitude.

¹⁷⁴ See McRae 1998: 75, Fascicle II passage 643a. Here the *Śūraṅgama Samādhi sūtra* (Śgs) records the simile of a broken jar carried by a *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha*, who unlike the bodhisattva, is unable to carry any ghee and honey in it to give to others.

¹⁷⁵ Passage T224: 463b25-27 is a very clear example of this which states: “Bodhisattva mahāsattvas that pursue *prajñāpāramitā*, not only pass all devas, asuras, world of humans but rise above all srotāpana[*sic*]

Buddha's teachings in these early years of Mahāyāna elucidation were composed of sangha members from all *yānas*, and so it would seem that the attainment of *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom was not an exclusive presentation for a bodhisattva but open to all wishing to hear and train in it. However, both *śrāvaka* and bodhisattva traditions believed that Buddhahood could only be attained by one who had made a determination/vow and received a prediction from a living Buddha and that this was contingent on vast quantities of merit. Although, from a philosophical standpoint, the wisdom of *prajñāpāramitā* was said to pervade equally all levels and *yānas*, this does not imply that there was an upwardly mobile movement from the *śrāvakayāna* to the bodhisattva path. For implicit in many passages is the notion of *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* as a self-contained, fixed trajectory path in accordance with the type of vow (*praṇidhāna*) made. In fact, there are no recorded instances in these early texts where *arhats*, because of any newly won attainments, became bodhisattvas.¹⁷⁶ As the

sakṛdāgāmin, anāgāmin, arhat, pratyekabuddhas." See also passages T224: 426c19-20, 427b24, that express that *prajñāpāramitā* knowledge cannot be reached by the *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha*. On the other hand, a *vaivartika* bodhisattva has regressed because he does not find or pursue *prajñāpāramitā*.

¹⁷⁶ Nor could I find any explicit remarks in the *Aṣṭa* which encourage those pursuing *arhat* or *pratyekabuddha* paths to convert to the bodhisattva path. I also conjecture that the first thought of enlightenment, the vow to reach Buddhahood (*anuttarasamyakṣambodhi*) as recorded in Mahāyāna *sūtras*, could have activated a path trajectory, infused with a level of altruism, which from the beginning differed from the *śrāvaka* path whose intention/vow was for some form of self-liberation. See Strong 1979: 231-232 for further information regarding an aspirant's initial *praṇidhāna* and its corresponding result, as recorded in the *Avadānaśataka*.

Mahāyāna gradually became systematized, a distinctly different soteriological path and goal were mapped. But from the outset, bodhisattva *sūtras* constantly reiterated the superiority of the bodhisattva path leading to *samyaksambodhi* together with repeated warnings against regressing or mistaking the *nirvāṇa* of an *arhat* as the end goal. It also appears that in the early texts, the *upāyakaśalya* component of *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom, did not manifest as the progressive enhancement of a compassionate attitude to liberate all beings whilst pursuing the path. Rather, it seems that the initial vow of a bodhisattva contained compassion in its latent or embryonic form which flowered on reaching full, complete enlightenment, and manifested in the chief activity of teaching and leading others along the bodhisattva path to the liberating state of Buddhahood. Because of this liberating outcome for all beings, the *bodhisattvayāna* was presented as a much superior path to that of the *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha* or *arhat* paths.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ Harrison (1987: 82) rather dismissively sums up the lot of the *śrāvakayāna* as being, "... characterized by attachment and limitation and those who opt for it do so primarily out of fear of saṃsāra which renders them incapable of aspiring to Buddhahood. "

8. Conclusion

In this study I have set out to examine the notion of *avaivartika* in early Buddhist literature, especially as it occurs in the *Daoxing Banruo jing*, Lokakṣema's Chinese translation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (T224). I have shown how this term carried special significance in early Mahāyāna texts as it denoted a bodhisattva's attainment of *anūpattikadharmakṣānti*, an attainment whereby full enlightenment of a Buddha was assured and regression to a lesser *śrāvaka* path was obviated. Whilst the notion of *avaivartika* has been the subject of several previous studies, these works have been based on accreted English translations of the later Sanskrit *Aṣṭa*, and their commentarial traditions, where the path to Buddhahood had undergone gradual systemization and took on a schema-like (*bhūmi*) structure. And so, at this later stage of textual production/development, the notion of *avaivartika* was an attainment incorporated into a somewhat disputed *bhūmi* level. In contrast, Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* does not present any such *bhūmi* hierarchy of achievements. The bodhisattva path at this stage of doctrinal development was in its formative years and so a bodhisattva "fell into" one of three or four rudimentary types, the penultimate being that of the *avaivartin*. I found that in Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224), the presentation of the term is employed in very much a binary context, often pitted against its *śrāvaka* counterparts

as a higher soteriological ideal with many justifications for its elevated standing.¹⁷⁸ As such we find repeated warnings about regressing to a lesser path often represented as Māra's crafty handiwork. Also, of interest is that at this formative stage of *bodhisattvayāna* explication as attested in Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa*, *avaivartika* attainment was not accompanied by *upāyakaśālyā* as a marker of great compassion but incorporated more as a cautionary warning against dwelling in a complacent state of *samādhi* leading to *arhatship*.

We find that much of Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* (T224) was concerned with how to attain the state of *avaivartika* through training in *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom or alternatively how to recognize a bodhisattva claiming such a high-status achievement. As an *avivartin* claim was based on the notion of a previous prediction by a past Buddha, *vyākaraṇa* was intrinsically linked and often used synonymously with *avivartika* as a term indicating irreversibility on the path to Buddhahood.

In the process of investigating this term I also looked at what is revealed regarding the intended audience for the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, to ascertain whether these teachings were presented as the exclusive domain of a bodhisattva or open and accessible to their *śrāvaka* counterparts. Here I have made an assumption, based on collected readings of early texts, that if a vow had been made fixing a soteriological

¹⁷⁸ These justifications are mainly that once Buddhahood was reached many *asaṃkhyeyas* of beings would be carried over to the same supreme state.

path trajectory, an upwardly mobile transition from a *śrāvaka* path to the *bodhisattvayāna* would not have been possible or very difficult. We have no accounts of such happenings in the *Aṣṭa*. I also tentatively conjecture that a vow, the first thought of bodhi, made by an aspiring bodhisattva, would have contained a latent or emergent form of compassionate intent, perhaps not expressed as such in the *Aṣṭa*.¹⁷⁹ I have noted that some passages in early texts such as the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, include the attribute of great compassion as a quality of the *avivartīn* bodhisattva whilst Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* alludes to compassionate activities only as the bodhisattva's final deeds as a Buddha, deeds which lead innumerable beings to this same state of *anuttarasamyaksambuddha*. Both of these assumptions need further scholarly investigation and until so remain in the hypothetical domain.

In the course of examining expressions of *avaivartika* in the *Aṣṭa* (T224) a major difficulty was encountered and duly noted, namely that an exact textual history of the *Aṣṭa* (T224) beginning with our first complete extant version, is a disputed area. As discussed, some scholars such as Conze see the larger *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* as

¹⁷⁹ This conclusion has been drawn partly on the basis that the *Aṣṭā* presents *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* as pervading all *yānas* and in some passages equates it with the realization of an *arhat* and *Pratyekabuddha*. What then differentiates these soteriological options? What makes the bodhisattva path superior? My answer to these questions is that a compassionate aspiration is intrinsic to the initial bodhi vow, the karmic outcome of which manifests in liberating actions for beings on a bodhisattva's attainment of Buddhahood.

extensions of the text that is witnessed as Lokakṣema's translated text whilst others such as Karashima and Zacchetti believe that the larger *sūtras* could well have been transmitted independently from their own textual sources. With this in mind I have been cautious in assuming a developmental linear approach beginning with the *Aṣṭa*, in the understanding and use of the notion of *avaivartika* and have included chronologies for texts where available and reasonably reliable.

Whilst the *Aṣṭa* is unequivocally a eulogy to *prajñāpāramitā* wisdom, the *avivartin* resounds repeatedly throughout the text as the physical embodiment of such wisdom. The Sadāprarudita story and his prediction to Buddhahood gives a human face to the *avivartin* ideal in an otherwise philosophical treatise, where, like Sadāprarudita all beings can take inspiration and courage to aspire to *avaivartika* in their quest for Buddhahood. I reiterate "all," for in this early exemplar of Mahāyāna *sūtras*, all, albeit witnessed in a single instance, is inclusive of the feminine, cutting across gender bias in the person of Gaṅgā upāsikā, who offers a golden flower as an emblem of Buddhahood for women everywhere.

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