

The Structure and Content of the *Avaiivartikacakra Sūtra* and Its Relation to the *Lotus Sūtra*

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General remarks on the shared content of Mahāyāna Sūtras

The great amount of Buddhist literature that comes to be classified by traditional and modern scholars as “Mahāyāna sūtras” was composed and formulated gradually over several decades or even centuries from the beginning of the common era. The Buddhist authors of this literature emerged from among mainstream Buddhist groups, i.e. the Nikāya ordination lineages. The canonical literature of mainstream Buddhist groups was built upon a common Buddhist literary heritage that was initially orally transmitted. Mainstream Buddhist literature, the Nikāya-Āgama corpus as well as the sets of Abhidharma, demonstrates a great deal of intertextuality. Likewise the literature that comes to be classified by later catalogers and codifiers of Buddhist canons in Chinese and Tibetan as “Mahāyāna sūtras” were most likely created through similar modes of production. The authorial communities who compiled “Mahāyāna” Buddhist texts were from a culture that shared in the common Buddhist literary heritage of the Nikāya-Āgama corpus as demonstrated by the shared elements of stock phrases, images, classifications, categories, and characters that both the Nikāya-Āgama corpus and “Mahāyāna” texts rely upon for their content.¹ I would also claim that the authorial communities that composed and compiled “Mahāyāna” texts were aware of each other’s

¹ For a synopsis of formulas and stock phrases from the Nikāya-Āgama corpus found in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* see Lamotte 1976: 333–335 and in the *Sūramgamasamādhi-sūtra* see Lamotte and Boin-Webb 1998: 243–244.

work, that there were shared elements between authorial communities of different “Mahāyāna” sūtras. A clear example of shared elements between Mahāyāna sūtras is the case of the *Maitreyaprasthāna* (Tib. mdo sde, tsa) where a section of this sūtra that describes the “irreversible wheel” (*avaivartacakra*) is found word for word in the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā* (See Braarvig and Pagel 2006: 25). Another example is the case of the brief *Jayamatipariṣcchāsūtra* (See Vinitā 2010; Apple *forthcoming c*) where the whole sūtra, preserved only in the Tibetan Kanjur and in a Sanskrit manuscript, is found in the *Śūramgamasamādhisūtra* (Taisho 642; Toh. 132). In addition to shared elements, Mahāyāna sūtras often shared idealized characters, like Mañjuśrī or Maitreya, to serve as authoritative interlocutors to present the new vision of Buddhism that these authorial communities wished to disseminate. If there is a vision that most all Mahāyāna sūtras share, it is a theme to construct a vision of the bodhisattva way to full Buddhahood. Quite often, authors of Mahāyāna sūtras will utilize magnificent and imaginative locations with distortions of space and time to introduce to the audience a new vision of the bodhisattva way.² Mahāyāna sūtras were also scriptural pamphlets that tried to resolve or address problems that authorial communities encountered while trying to construct a new vision of the bodhisattva way (Skilling 2004).

In this paper I will examine common elements between the *Saddharmapuṇḍarikasūtra* (hereafter, *Lotus sūtra*) and the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* to demonstrate shared literary themes between the two sūtras and possible relations between the sūtras. This comparison will also make visible one segment of the complex relations of intertextuality that occurred in early Mahāyāna literature.

Structure and Content of Avaivartikacakra sūtra

A significant, yet previously unstudied, self-proclaimed Mahāyāna scripture, is the *Avaivartikadharmacakra sūtra* (‘The Discourse on Irreversibility’) (Handurukande 1973, Apple 2004, 2008). The *Avaivartikadharmacakra sūtra* is an early Mahāyāna scripture that

2 See Leighton 2007 for a work which explores how magnificent measures of time and space relate to the central message of the *Lotus sūtra*.

focuses on the concept of the irreversibility (*avaivartika*) of bodhisattvas (“Buddhas-intraining”) from the attainment of full Buddhahood. The concept of the irreversible (*avaivartika*) bodhisattva is considered to be one of the most vital subjects in the historical development of Mahāyāna Buddhism due to the concept’s prevalence, as well as its transvaluing meaning, in early (pre-3rd century) Mahāyāna literature. The *Avaivartikadharmacakra sūtra* provides the earliest and most comprehensive discussion of this concept among Mahāyāna scriptures other than the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. The *sūtra* is also notable for its advocacy of *ekayāna*, its usage of narrative displacement, and its rhetoric of ‘word-play’ through semantic elucidation or *nirukti*.³ One may infer that this text was an influential Mahāyāna sūtra in Buddhist culture as indicated by its preservation and transmission in South, Central, and East Asia over many centuries (Lancaster and Park 1979). The importance of this text is also demonstrated through its active citation in indigenous commentaries on the *bodhisattva* path by prominent Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist scholars, from the second to twelfth centuries, such as Nāgārjuna (2nd century), Ārya-Vimuktisena (5th century), Haribhadra (8th century), Kamalaśīla (8th century), and Jayānanda (12th century), among others (See Apple, *forthcoming a*). Indeed, this sūtra has significance up through the present day in its citation among contemporary Tibetan scholars of Buddhism (e.g. Bdud’joms ’Jigs-bral-ye-śes-rdo-rje et al 2002).

The *Avaivartikacakra mahāyāna sūtra* is no longer extant in any Indic language. I should note that I refer to the Sanskrit title of the text as the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra*, a title which I did not invent or hypothesize, but the title of the sūtra which is preserved in the *Abhisamayālamkāra* commentaries of both Ārya-Vimuktisena and Haribhadra.⁴ The *Avaivartikacakra mahāyāna sūtra* is preserved in

3 On the use of semantic elucidation (*nirukti*) among Indian religious traditions in general see Balbir 1991 and for the use of *nirukti* in Mahāyāna sūtras see Apple 2009.

4 See Vimuktisena, and Corrado Pensa, *L’Abhisamayālamkāravṛtti di Ārya-Vimuktisena: Primo Abhisamaya; Testo e note crit.* (Roma: Is.M.E.O., 1967), page 46: “*Avaivartikacakra sūtre*,” and Haribhadra, and Unrai Wogihara, *Abhisamayālamkāralokā prajñāpāramitāvākyā: (Commentary on Aṣṭasahasrikā-prajñāpāramitā)* (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1932), page 36.8: “avaivartikacakra sūtra.”

Chinese, Tibetan, Manchu, and Mongolian. Three translations of this sūtra are preserved in Chinese. The first is the *Aweiyuezhizhe jing* 阿維越致遮經 (T. 266) translated by Dharmarakṣa in four *juan* on the 14th day, 10th month, 5th year of Tai Kang (泰康), Western Jin dynasty (西晉) (November 8th, A.D. 284) in Dunhuang (敦煌). The second translation is the *Butuizhuanfalun jing* 不退轉法輪經 (T. 267) translated during the Northern Liang dynasty (北涼) (A.D. 412–439). The third translation is the *Guangboyanjing butuizhuanlun jing* 廣博嚴淨不退轉法輪經 (T. 268) translated by 智嚴 Zhi-yan during the 4th year of Yuan Jia (元嘉), Liusong dynasty (劉宋) (A.D. 427) in Zhi-yuan Monastery (枳園寺) in Yang-du (楊都).

The *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* has been known in Tibet since the beginnings of the recorded importation of Buddhist texts into this country. The early catalog of the *Lhan kar ma* lists the 'Phags pa *phyir mi ldog pa'i 'khor lo* (*ārya-avaivarta-cakra*) (no. 105) among the catalog's fifth section, *Theg pa chen po'i mdo sde* (*mahāyāna sūtras*). The catalog notes the length of the sūtra as six *bam po*, the equivalent of 1,800 Sanskrit *śloka*s. The *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* is also listed in another extant early catalog known as the *dKar chag 'Phang thang ma* (c. 806) where the sūtra is listed in the fourth section of *Mdo chen po* ("great sūtras") as 'Phags pa *phyir mi ldog pa'i 'khor lo* consisting of six *bam po*. The sūtra is listed among the 104 titles of Saddharma (*dam pa'i chos*) found in the *Mahāvvyutpatti* under No. 1371 *Avaivartikacakram* (*phyir mi ldog pa'i 'khor lo*).⁵

The *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* is classified as a *mahāyāna sūtra* and is said to have been taught by the Buddha, at Śrāvastī, in the Jeta Grove of Anāthapiṇḍada. The sūtra depicts the Buddha teaching the "wheel of the irreversible doctrine" (*avaivartikadharmacakra*) where all beings are destined for Buddhahood. The overall content and structure of the sūtra reflects influences from several Mahāyāna sūtras. Akira Hirakawa (1990) describes the sūtra as a combination of the *Perfection of Wisdom and the Lotus sūtra*. The *Avaivartikacakra* is

5 As noted by Pagel (2007), the historical development of the list of 104 titles of Saddharma, a list of Mahāyāna sūtras including the *Lotus sūtra*, needs further investigation.

influenced by the *Perfection of Wisdom sūtra* in terms of its teaching on emptiness and irreversible bodhisattvas. The *Lotus sūtra* influence is apparent with the *Avaiartikacakra*'s emphasis on *ekayāna* and *skill-in-means* (*upāya*). This correlation of subject matter between the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaiartikacakra* would lead some Chinese catalogues to list the sūtras together within a single section (See Demiéville, *Choix d'études bouddhiques*, 1929–1970, page 192, §2111. IV). The *Śūramgama-samādhisūtra* also has several features that correspond with the *Avaiartikacakra* as there are some overlapping content and parallels in narrative structure. For instance, the first bodhisattva listed in the audience of the sūtra is named *Avaiartikadharmacakrapravartaka* 'Setting turning the irreversible Wheel of Dharma' (Lamotte 1998: 107). Along these lines, the Buddha explains to Mañjuśrī in the later part of the sūtra that the Dharma expounded in the Ekapradīpa universe is the 'irreversible Wheel of Dharma (*avaiartikadharmacakra*)' (Lamotte 1998: 199–200). The *Avaiartikacakra sūtra* was also composed at a time when Akṣobhya (Tib. *mi 'khrugs pa*) and Amitābha (Tib. *'od dpag med*) were popular as the sūtra briefly mentions visions of both Buddhas as a benefit of the sūtra (Chapter 14, mdo sde zha 293a4–6).⁶

As mentioned above, the text was translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa and his translation divides the sūtra into eighteen chapters. Dharmarakṣa's chapter headings, for the most part, mark transitions between episodes or subject matter of the sūtra. The later Chinese translations as well as all the Tibetan translations do not have separate chapter headings. All Tibetan Kanjur versions, including the Dunhuang fragment, are divided by volume (*bam po*) markers. The exception to this is the Tabo fragments which do not have *bam po* markers in the textual remains. Although we cannot be sure if Dharmarakṣa's headings were his own interpolations or were part of the

6 Nattier (2000; 2003b) has demonstrated that Akṣobhya was initially more popular than Amitābha, and that the worship of Amitābha in the pure land of Sukhāvṛti developed later and superseded the worship of Akṣobhya. The fact that the *Avaiartikacakasūtra* briefly mentions both Buddhas equally in passing indicates that it was composed at a time between the popularity of Akṣobhya and the subsequent emergence of the Amitābha tradition.

indigenous Indic manuscript, we will follow his chapter headings as a means to facilitate an analysis of the structure and content of the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra*. The following table provides a list of the chapter headings in Dharmarakṣa's translation:

Taishō 266	Chapter Heading		Translation	Sanskrit
198b17–202b09	不退轉法輪品第一	1	Irrversible Wheel of Dharma	Avaivartikacakra
202b10–203c20	持信品第二	2	One who grasps the truth	Śraddhānūsārin
203c21–204c18	奉法品第三	3	Upholding the Law	Dharmānūsārin
204c19–205c28	八等品第四	4	Rank of Eighth	Aṣṭamaka
205c29–206c20	道跡品第五	5	“Path going”	Srota-āpanna
206c21–207c04	往來品第六	6	“Coming and Going”	Sakṛdāgāmin
207c11	不還品第七	7	Non-returning	Anāgāmin
208c01–210c06	無著品第八	8	One who is free from attachment	Arhat
210c07–212a08	聲聞品第九	9	Śrāvaka	Śrāvaka
212a09–213c11	緣覺品第十	10	Pratyekabuddha	Pratyekabuddha
213c12–214c04	釋果想品第十一	11	Contemplating the result of Śākyamuni	—————
214c05–218c24	降魔品第十二	12	Subjugating demons	—————
219a05–221a25	如來品第十三	13	Tathāgata	Tathāgata
221a26–223b14	開化品第十四	14	Opening the teaching	—————
223b15–224b04	師子女品第十五	15	Lion woman	*Kumārīsiṃha
224b05–224c13	歎法師品第十六	16	Benefits Obtained by an Expounder of the Dharma	dharmabhāṇakānuśaṃsā
224c14–225b09	譏謗品第十七	17	Slander and ridicule	
225b10–226a20	囑累品第十八	18	Entrustment	Parindanā

Relations with the Lotus Sūtra

In the next few pages I will discuss several points of relation between the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra*. Both sūtras are composed in prose followed by verses that summarize the content

in each chapter. The above table illustrates that the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaiṅvartikacakra sūtra* share similar chapter titles in that chapters 16 (“Benefits Obtained by an Expounder of the Dharma”) and 18 (“Entrustment”) are the same chapter titles in Dharmarakṣa’s translation of the *Lotus sūtra* chapters 18 (歎法師) and chapter 27 (囑累). Both sūtras also have episodes that involve gender transformation (Chapter 15 ‘Lion woman’ in the *Avaiṅvartikacakra* and the episode of the nāga king’s daughter in Chapter 12 of the *Lotus sūtra*). However, these two sūtras do have a number of points of difference and they are addressing different problems regarding the bodhisattva path and the nature of Buddhas. The *Lotus sūtra* takes place on Gṛdhrakūṭa mountain near Rājagṛha while the *Avaiṅvartikacakra sūtra* is located at the grove of Anāthapiṇḍada in Jeta Wood in Śrāvastī. The *Lotus sūtra* has a number of chapters that focus on parables, such as the parable of the burning house (Chapter 3), the parable of the medicinal plants (Chapter 5), and the apparitional city (Chapter 7). The *Avaiṅvartikacakra sūtra* mentions several allegories but they are not stories of chapter length. The *Lotus sūtra*, as is well-known, has a chapter devoted to the “Lifespan of the Tathāgata” (Chapter 16) as well as individual chapters focusing on specific bodhisattvas such as Gadgadasvara (Chapter 24), Avalokiteśvara (Chapter 25), and Samantabhadra (Chapter 28). The *Lotus sūtra* also has a chapter that focuses on *dhāraṇī* (Chapter 26). The *Avaiṅvartikacakra sūtra* does not have any discussion of the lifespan of the Tathāgata nor does it have chapters on individual bodhisattvas or *dhāraṇī*.

However, if we accept the hypothesis that the *Saddharmapuṅḍarikasūtra* was gradually composed through a process of four stages that was initially proposed by Fuse (1934), and followed by Karashima and Kajiyama, then these chapters of the *Lotus sūtra* not in common with the *Avaiṅvartikacakra sūtra* may be later additions to an earlier layer of the *Lotus sūtra*. Karashima (1991, 1993, 2001) and Kajiyama (2000) propose that *Lotus sūtra* developed through four stages of formation as follows: stage (1) consists of the *Lotus sūtra*’s Triṣṭubh-Jagatī verses, found in chapters from the *Uṇḍāyakaśālyā-* (II) to the *Vyākaraṇa-parivarta* (IX); the next stage was (2) śloka verse and prose, found in those chapters (II–IX); stage (3) consisted of Chapters

from the *Dharmabhāṇaka*-(X) to the *Tathāgataṛddhyabhisamṣkāraparivarta* (XX), as well as *Nidāna*-(I) and *Anuṣarindanā-parivarta* (XXVII); and the final stage (4) consisted of the other chapters (XXI–XXVI) and the latter half of the *Stūpasamdarśana-parivarta* (XI), i.e. the so-called *Devadatta-parivarta*.

In terms of the related content that I will mention in the next few pages, the *Avaiivartikacakra sūtra* corresponds with the content of the *Lotus sūtra* that was formulated during stage (2) and stage (3) of its theorized composition. The content of the *Avaiivartikacakra sūtra* that is related to the *Lotus sūtra* is found between chapter 2 (‘skilful means’) and chapter 15 (‘Bodhisattvas emerging from the earth’) of the *Lotus sūtra*.

Samādhi and Mañjuśrī and Maitreya as the main opening interlocutors

The *Lotus sūtra*, after providing a introduction with stock phrases and characters, mentions that the Buddha teaches the Mahāyāna sūtra called *Immeasurable Meanings (Mahānirdeśa)* and that:

After having taught this sutra, the Buddha sat cross-legged, entered the *samādhi* called the “abode of immeasurable meanings” (*ananta-nirdeśa-pratiṣṭhāna*) and remained unmoving in both body and mind (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 4).

This is followed by Maitreya and Mañjuśrī having a discussion about why the Buddha is engaged in the *samādhi* and why he has emitted light rays throughout the eastern universe. Mañjuśrī answers Maitreya’s questions by telling a miraculous tale of the previous Buddhas named Candrasūryapradīpa and instructing Maitreya that the marvels that the Buddha is displaying correspond to the marvels Mañjuśrī witnessed in the past as the Bodhisattva Varaprabha and that the Buddha will teach the Mahāyāna sūtra called the *Lotus sūtra* (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 15).

The *Avaiivartikacakra sūtra* also begins with miraculous events and the Buddha along with Maitreya and Mañjuśrī absorbed in

samādhi. The first chapter, entitled “The irreversible wheel of dharma” (不退轉法輪) by Dharmarakṣa, describes a number of miraculous events in preparation for the Buddha to preach the *sūtra*. The *sūtra* begins (mdo sde zha, 241b6) with the Buddha absorbed in the *samādhi* of **vimalaprabhā* (*od dri ma med pa*), Mañjuśrī is absorbed in the “evoking total-illumination” (**samantāloka-kara, kun tu snang byed*) *samādhi*, and the bodhisattva, mahāsattva Maitreya absorbed in the “all illuminating” (**samantāvabhāsa, kun tu snang ba*) *samādhi*. These three are absorbed in *samādhi* during the second half of the night when at dawn Śāriputra leaves his dwelling to go to Mañjuśrī’s residence.

The opening chapter of the *Avaiṅvartikacakra sūtra* utilizes a narrative technique which I refer to as ‘displacement’. The *Lotus sūtra* legitimizes its teaches by explaining that this *sūtra* was taught by multiple Buddhas many aeons in the past. The narrative displaces the construction of the *sūtra*’s authority to a former time that cannot be empirically verified. Likewise, the *Avaiṅvartikacakra sūtra* in its opening setting has the characters Śāriputra and Mañjuśrī travel to another world-system called “Irreversible sound” (Avaiṅvartikanirghoṣa) to ostensibly learn from a Buddha in that realm. This entails introducing the audience to problems and issues to be negotiated by Buddhists in this world through the narrative displaced context of another world-system.⁷

One Ultimate Vehicle: Ekayāna

The *Lotus sūtra* famously teaches the doctrine of the single vehicle (*ekayāna*) through explicit statements and through parables. A central citation that illustrates the single vehicle in the *Lotus sūtra* is as follows:

“With a single duty, Śāriputra, with a single task the Tathāgata, *Arhat*

7 It should be noted that this world-system is also found in the *Anantabuddhakṣetrāguṇodbhāvananāmahāyānasūtra* “Proclamation of the virtues in the infinite Buddhafields.” See Bhikṣuṇī Vinitā. A Unique Collection of Twenty Sūtras in a Sanskrit manuscript from the Potala. Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House, 2010, page 571.

and Perfectly Awakened One appears in the world... Namely, in order to inspire living beings to the mental vision of a tathāgata (*tathāgatajñādarśana*), the Tathāgata, *Arhat* and Perfectly Awakened One appears in the world... With reference to only a single vehicle, Śāriputra, I teach the Dharma for living beings, namely, the vehicle of the buddhas. Śāriputra, there is not any second or third vehicle. This, Śāriputra, is the True Law everywhere in the worlds of the ten regions.”⁸

The *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* also teaches the single vehicle but in a roundabout manner. In the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* Śāriputra arrives at Mañjuśrī’s residence and joins Mañjuśrī sitting cross-legged and together they travel (through *samādhi*?) eastward beyond worlds as numerous as the sands of the Ganges river to the world realm (*lokadhātu*) known as Irreversible Sphere (*Avaivartikanirghoṣa phyir mi ldog pa’i dbyings*; Cf. Aṣṭa 17: *avinivartaniyadhātu*) where the Tathāgata *Ābhāvṛtapadmavistrākāya (*’od zer gyis khebs pa’i pad ma rab tu rgyas pa’i sku*) dwells. This Tathāgata is surrounded by gold complexion bodhisattvas endowed with thirty-two auspicious marks sitting on thousand-petalled lotuses. This Tathāgata asks Mañjuśrī where he is from and Mañjuśrī replies that he is from the Sahā (*mi mjed*) world system.

Then a mahāsattva, bodhisattva named Ānandokti (*sgra snyan*) asks the Tathāgata where the Sahā world is, which Buddha teaches there, and what kind of dharma does he teach. The Tathāgata indicates that the Sahā world is west beyond as many world systems as sands in the Ganges and that the Buddha Śākyamuni resides there. Ānandokti asks if such a teaching is harmonious with teachings of other Buddhas. The Tathāgata responds that this teaching is harmonious and that all Buddhas teach the *avaivartadharmacakra* (*phyir mi ldog*

8 Translation from Zimmermann 1999: 156 based on Sanskrit from Kern 39.13–40.15: *ekakṛtyena śāriputraikakarāṇīyena tathāgato ’rhan samyaksambuddho loka utpadyate ... yad idaṃ tathāgatajñānadarśanasamādāpanahetunimittam sattvānām tathāgato ’rhan samyaksambuddho loka utpadyate / ...ekam evāhaṃ śāriputra yānam ārabhya sattvānām dharmam deśayāmi yad idaṃ buddhayānam / na kiṃcīd chāriputra dvītiyaṃ vā tṛtiyaṃ vā yānam samvidyate / sarvatraiṣā śāriputra dharmatā daśaḍigloke /...*

pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo) that leads beings to one vehicle through utilizing skill-in-means after initially indicating three vehicles. The *Avaiartikacakra sūtra* reads in detail as follows:

“Then the Tathāgata *Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra, although he already knew, said the following words to Mañjuśrī, “Mañjuśrī, from where do you presently come from?” Mañjuśrī replied, “Bhagavan, I come from the Sahā world system.” Then, with reverence to the Bhagavan a bodhisattva named Pleasant Sound (Ānandokti), arose from his lotus seat, put his upper robe over one shoulder, prostrated with his head to the feet of the Bhagavan, placed his right knee on the ground, saluted the Bhagavan with his hands joined together, and asked him. “How far is the Sahā world system?” The Tathāgata *Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra said to the bodhisattva-mahāsattva Pleasant Sound, “Son of Good Family, it is beyond as many world systems as particle of sand in the ganges river in the western direction from this world system.” [The bodhisattva] replied, “What Bhagavat teaches dharma in that world system?” The Bhagavan [*Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra] replied, “the Tathāgata, Arhat, complete, perfect Buddha called Śākyamuni.” [The bodhisattva] asked, “What kind of dharma does that Bhagavan teach?” [The Bhagavan [*Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra] replied], “He sets forth the three vehicles.” [The bodhisattva] asked, “Bhagavan, what are the three vehicles?” [The Bhagavan [*Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra] replied] “The vehicle of the śrāvakas, the vehicle of the pratyekabuddhas, and the Mahāyāna. Having established those three vehicles, the Bhagavan, the Tathāgata, Arhat, the complete, perfect Buddha Śākyamuni teaches that dharma.” [The bodhisattva] asked, “Bhagavan, is that not compatible with the dharma of all Buddha Bhagavans?” [The Bhagavan [*Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra] replied], “Son of Good Family, this is compatible with the teachings of the Buddha Bhagavans.” [The bodhisattva] asked, “To what extent is this compatible with the dharma teachings of the the Buddha Bhagavans?” [The Bhagavan [*Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra] replied], “The dharma teaching of the Buddha Bhagavans is compatible with the discourse on irreversible dharma (avaivartikadharmacakra).” [The bodhisattva] asked, “Bhagavan, How is it that a Bhagavan sets forth the three vehicles and presently teaches

dharma?”⁹

In this citation the *Avaiartikacakra sūtra* portrays the bodhisattvas in the “Irreversible sound” (Avaiartikanirghoṣa) world-system as never having heard of “three vehicles.” The implication being that Buddha Śākyamuni teaches a kind of dharma that bodhisattvas in the pure realm of “Irreversible sound” are not familiar with. Although the sūtra does not explicit seem to advocate the single vehicle at this point, the statement which follows implicitly indicates that the sūtra is promoting the single vehicle.

Skill-in-Means (*upāya-kausālya*)

Skill-in-means is a commonly well-known concept in discussions

9 *Avaiartikacakra*, Chapter 1, paragraph B [Derge 242b2–243a5]: de nas de bzhin gshegs pa 'od zer gyi khebs pa'i padma rab tu rgyas pa'i skus mkhen bzhin du / 'jam dpal gzhon nur gyur pa la 'di skad ces bka' stsal to // 'jam dpal gzhon nur gyur pa khyod da bzod gang nas 'ongs / de skad ces bka' stsal pa [242b4] dang / 'jam dpal bzhon nur gyur pas de bzhin gshegs pa 'od zer gyis khebs pa'i padma rab tu rgyas pa'i sku la 'di skad ces gsol to / /bcom ldan 'das 'jig rten gyi khamis mi mjed nas mchiso / /de nas bcom ldan 'das de'i rim gro pa byang chub sems dpa' [242b5] sgra snyan ces bya ba de padma'i mi stan de las lang te bla gos phrag pa gcig tu gzar nas / bcom ldan 'das de'i zhabs la mgo bos phyag 'tshal te / pus mo g.yas pa'i lha nga padma'i snying po la gtsugs nas / bcom ldan 'das ga la ba der logsu thal mo sbyar [242b6] ba bdud de/ bcom ldan 'das la 'di skad ces gsol to / /bcom ldan 'das 'jig rten gyi khamis mi mjed de srid na mchis / /de skad ces gsol pa dang / de bzhin gshegs pa 'od zer gyis khebs pa'i padma rab tu rgyas pa'i skus / byang chub sems [242b7] dpa' chen po sgra snyan la 'di skad ces bka' stsal to / /rigs kyi bu 'jig rten gyi khamis 'di nas nub phyogs logs su 'jig rten gyi khamis gang ga'i klung gi bye ma snyed 'das pa na'o / /gsol pa / bcom ldan 'das 'jig rten gyi khamis de ni / bcom ldan 'das gang chos stong pa [243a.1]]bcom ldan 'das des bka' stsal pa/ de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas shAkya thub pa zhes bya'o/ /gsol pa bcom ldan 'das de ni chos ston pa ci 'dra ba zhig lags/ bka' stsal pa/ theg pa gsum la brtsams [243a.2]]te'o/ /gsol pa bcom ldan 'das theg pa gsum po de dag gang lags/ bka' stsal pa/ nyan thos kyi theg pa dang / rang sangs rgyas kyi theg pa dang / theg pa chen po ste/ theg pa gsum po de dag la brtsams nas/ bcom ldan 'das de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom [243a.3]]pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas shAkya thub pa de chos ston to/ /gsol pa bcom ldan 'das sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das thams cad kyi chos bstan pa 'thun pa ma lags sam/ bka' stsal pa/ rigs kyi bu sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das rnams kyi chos bstan pa ni [243a.4]]'thun no/ /gsol pa sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das rnams kyi chos bstan pa ji tsam zhig 'thun/ bka' stsal pa/ sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das rnams kyi chos bstan pa ni phyr mi ldog pa'i chos kyi 'khor lor 'thun no/ /gsol pa bcom ldan 'das ji ltar bcom ldan [243a.5]]'das de theg pa gsum la brtsams te de ltar chos ston/

of Mahāyāna Buddhism. In a recent study of an early Mahāyāna sūtra, Jan Nattier (2003a:154–156) has noted two types of skill-in-means. The earliest type, found in such texts as *Aṣṭasahāsrīkā-prajñāpāramitā*, refers to a set of tactics utilized by bodhisattvas to master attainments and realizations while journeying to full Buddhahood. The tactics of skill-in-means are employed to counter and stave off any potential undesirable karma result from meditational attainment such as rebirth in a form realm heaven or the attainment of *nirvāṇa* as an Arhat. The other type of skill-in-means refers to a technique practiced by the Buddha to adapt the teachings of the Dharma to the needs, aspirations, and capacities of sentient beings. This latter type of skill-in-means is what is found in the *Lotus sūtra*. Likewise, the *Avaivartikacakasūtra* mentions the latter type of skill-in-means. In the sūtra, after the bodhi-sattva-mahāsattva Pleasant Sound inquires about the dharma taught by Buddha Śākyamuni, the Buddha of the “Irreversible sound” (*Avaivartikanirghoṣa*) world-system explains the manner in which Śākyamuni teaches. The *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* states:

[The Bhagavan [*Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra] replied] “Son of Good Family, sentient beings aspire for the inferior and when they do not enter the single vehicle, [the Buddhas] guide them with skill-in-means. Son of Good Family, the Buddhas, the Blessed Ones, have great skill in means.”¹⁰

In brief, due to sentient beings inferior aspirations for the *nirvāṇa* of an Arhat, the Buddha guides them in the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* with teachings to enable them to aspire for full Buddhahood. We note here that for the author of the *Sūtrasamuccaya*, traditionally held to be Nāgārjuna, these citations from the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* are utilized to substantiate the claim that the Buddha teaches *ekayāna* and that these citations come right after Nāgārjuna cites the *Lotus*

10 *Avaivartikacakra*, Chapter 1, paragraph C [Derge 243a5–243a6]: *bka' stsal pa/ rigs kyi bu sems can de dag ni dman pa la mos pa dag ste/ de dag theg pa gcig la mi 'jug pas na thabs mkhas pas/ de dag de ltar nye bar khrid de/ rigs kyi bu sangs rgyas bcom ldan* [N243a.6] *'das rnams ni thabs mkhas pa chen po dang ldan pa'o/*

Bodhisattvas “rising up from the earth”

The *Lotus sūtra* famously contains a narrative where bodhisattvas emerge from the earth to be entrusted with the propagation of the *Lotus sūtra*. This occurs in chapter 15 of Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation and chapter 14 as preserved in the Nepalese Sanskrit. At the beginning of this chapter, countless bodhisattvas from other worlds ask for permission to propagate the sūtra in the *sahā* world after the Buddha’s death, but Śākyamuni declines, stating that bodhisattvas already exist in the *sahā* world who can preserve, recite, and teach the *dharmaparyāya* of the *Lotus sūtra*. At this point in the narrative the earth trembles and splits open, and from within it emerges a host of bodhisattvas equal in number to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges Rivers, each with his own retinue of followers. The bodhisattvas

11 As noted, Nāgārjuna cites this portion of the text to substantiate his view on ekayāna. See Pāsādika, Nāgārjuna’s *Sūtrasamuccaya a critical edition of the mDo kun las btus pa*. Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag I Kommission, 1989) on the tenth theme (j) *theg pa gcig la mos pa’i sems can de dag ni shin tu rnyed par dka’ ste/* “the difficulty in finding sentient beings who aspire for the single vehicle,” page 130.15–131.5. A comparison of several Kanjur versions of the passage indicates variants in the Phug brag and Tokyo: Phug brag, F, mdo sde nga, 323b6–8; London, L, mdo sde ’a 292a3–8; Derge, D, mdo sde zha 243a3–6; Stog, S, mdo sde ’a, 311a2–6; Tokyo T, mdo sde ’a 278a4–78b1:

’jam dpal gzhon nur gyur pasl gsol pa / sangs rgyas bcom ldan ’das rnam kyis chos bstan pa ji tsaṃ zhig ²thun / ⁸ bka’ stsal pa / ¹¹sangs rgyas bcom ldan ’das rnam kyis³ chos bstan pa ni phyir mi ldog pa’i (N 214b) chos kyi ’khor lor⁹ ²mthun no // gsol pa¹² / ⁴ bcom ldan¹⁰ ’das ji ltar bcom ldan (D 190b) ’das⁵ theg pa gsum la brtsams te / ⁴ de⁶ ltar chos ston / bka’ stsal pa / rigs kyi bu sems can de dag ni dman pa la mos pa dag ste / ¹⁴ de dag theg pa gcig la mi ’jug pas na / ⁴ thabs mkhas pas’ de dag¹⁵ de ltar nye bar khrid (P 224b) de⁷ rigs kyi bu / ⁴ sangs rgyas bcom ldan ’das rnam ni thabs mkhas pa chen po dang ldan pa’o // bcom ldan ’das de ni snyigs ma lnga’i dus na byung ste / de dag ni theg pa gcig la ma mos pa dag go //

1) DFLST ø ’jam dpal gzhon nur gyur pas 2) DLS ’thun 3) DL kyi 4) DLS ø / 5) DLST bcom ldan ’das de 6) LT da 7) DL / 8) FT has the phrase bcom ldan ’das sangs rgyas bcom ldan ’das thams cad kyi chos stan pa mthun pam lags sam / 9) FT missing phyir mi ldog pa’i chos kyi ’khor lor 10) F sangs rgyas 11) T rigs kyi bu 12) T adds sangs rgyas bcom ldan ’das rnam kyis chos bstan pa ji tsaṃ zhig ’thun bka’ stsal pa / sangs rgyas bcom ldan ’das rnam kyis chos bstan pa ni phyir mi ldog pa’i chos kyi ’khor lor ’thun no / 14) T ø / 15) T missing de dag

emerging from the earth (*bodhisattvaṛṥthivivirasamudgama*) have bodies that are golden and adorned with the thirty-two features that characterize a Buddha.¹² The title of this chapter in Sanskrit is *bodhisattvaṛṥthivivirasamudgama* “issuing of bodhisattvas from the gaps of the Earth” which is translated in Tibetan as *byang chub sems dpa' sa rum nas 'thon pa*. This same phrase along with a similar narrative event occurs in the Tibetan version of the *Avaiartikacakra sūtra*.

In the *Avaiartikacakra sūtra* a number of signs occur to signal that the Buddhas is about to give the teaching on the *avaivartikacakra* “irreversible discourse.” Flowers spread out covering all of Jetavana’s Grove, trees emerged with flowers and fruit, all of Jetavana’s grove appears full of clear, blue, pure water. The monks who come to hear this teaching can not see trees or the monastery but, having seen a great illumination, consider that “Now, a great dharma will be taught” based upon the appearance of the indicating signs there. Then, at this point in the narrative of the *Avaiartikacakra sūtra* the sūtra states:

Thereupon, the Blessed One, arising from his concentration, remained in his seat. Immediately upon the Blessed One arising, Mañjuśrī, together with countless millions of bodhisattvas, emerged out of the gaps of the earth (*sa rum nas mngon par 'thon*), and having appeared, they bowed their heads down to the feet of the Blessed One, circled

12 *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, chapter 14, Kern 297.12-298.5: samanantarabhāsitā ceyam bhagavatā vāgathayam sahā lokadhātuḥ samantāt sphuṭitā visphuṭitā abhūt tebhyaśca sphoṭāntarebhyo bahūni bodhisattvakoṭīnayutaśatasahasrānyuttiṣṭhante sma suvarṇavarṇaiḥ kāyairdvātriṃśadbhirmahāpuruṣalakṣaṇaiḥ samanvāgatāḥ / ye 'syāṃ mahāṛṥthiviyāmadha ākāśadhātau viharanti sma / imāmeva sahāṃ lokadhātum niśrītya te khalvimamevamrūpaṃ bhagavataḥ śabdām śrūtṃvā **ṛṥthiviyā adhaḥ samutthitāḥ**, yeśāmekaiko bodhisattvaḥ ṣaṣṭigaṅgānādivālukopamabodhisattva-parivāro gaṇi mahāgaṇi gaṇācaryah. Tibetan, Derge 111a: bcom ldan 'das kyi de skad ces bka' stsal ma thag tu/ 'jig rten gyi khams mi mjed 'di kun tu gas/ rnam par gas par gyur to/ /gas pa de dag gi bar nas gang dag 'jig rten gyi khams mi mjed 'di nyid la brten cing / sa chen po 'di'i 'og gi nam mkha'i khams la gnas pa'i byang chub sems dpa' lus gser gyi kha dog lta bu skeyes bu chen po'i mtshan sum cu rtsa gnyis dang ldan pa bye ba khrag khrig brgya stong phrag mang po 'thon te/ de dag bcom ldan 'das kyi gsung 'di lta bu 'di thos nas **sa rum nas 'thon te**/ de dag las byang chub sems dpa' re re yang g.yog byang chub sems dpa' gang ga'i klung drug cu'i bye ma snyed yod cing

around him three times, and then all of those bodhisattvas-mahāsattvas together sat in the presence of the Blessed One.¹³

In the narrative of the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra*, the countless millions of bodhisattvas who accompany Mañjuśrī are gold complexion bodhisattvas endowed with thirty-two auspicious marks just as in the *Lotus sūtra*. The narrative motif of bodhisattvas emerging out of the earth to signal an important juncture in the teaching is shared between the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* and the *Lotus sūtra*.

Conclusion

In brief, I have demonstrated that there are several common narrative elements which the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* share. Both sūtras place emphasis on *ekayāna* and skill-in-means (*upāya*) as well as utilize a literary motif of bodhisattvas “emerging from the gaps of the earth.” I think that these shared traits demonstrates that the authorial communities of these sūtras had a shared literary heritage, were aware of each other’s works, but were working to solve different problems in formulating the new vision of the bodhisattva way in relation to a new understanding of the nature of Buddhas and their teachings. These points that have been briefly presented in this paper are segments that allow us to see a larger picture of the formation and development of early Mahāyāna Buddhist literature taking place during the first several centuries of the common era.

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*Avaivartikacakra*nāmamahāyānasūtra. Translated by Jinamitra, Dānaśīla,

13 *Avaivartikacakra*, Chapter 1, paragraph F [Derge 244b5–244a6]: *de nas bcom ldan 'das 'das* [244b.5] *]ting nge 'dzin de las bzhengs nas gdan bshams pa la bzhugs so/ / bcom ldan 'das bzhugs ma thag tu 'jam dpal gzhon nur gyur pa/ byang chub sems dpa' bye ba phrag grangs med pa rnams dang / lhan cig tu sa rum nas mngon par 'thon te/ 'thon nas kyang bcom* [244b.6] *]ldan 'das kyi zhabs la mgo bos phyag 'tshal te/ bcom ldan 'das la lan gsum bskor ba byas nas/ byang chub sems dpa' sems dpa' chen po de dag dang lhan cig tu bcom ldan 'das kyi sphyan sngar 'dug go /*

Munivarma, Ye shes sde. '*Phags pa phyir mi ldog pa'i 'khor lo zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*'. Tôh. no. 240. Dergé Kanjur, vol. ZHA, folios 241v.4–301v.7.

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The Structure and Content of the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* and Its Relation to the *Lotus Sūtra*

James B. Apple

The Buddha is traditionally considered to have taught the *Avaivartacakra-sūtra* at Śrāvastī, in the Jeta Grove of Anāthapiṇḍada. The sūtra is classified as a mahāyāna sūtra and depicts the Buddha teaching the “wheel of the irreversible doctrine” (*avaivartikadharmacakra*) where all beings are destined for Buddhahood. The overall content and structure of the sūtra reflects influences from several Mahāyāna sūtras. This paper examines the structure and content of the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* and its relations to such sūtras as the *Lotus sūtra*. The presentation demonstrates how the *Avaivartikacakra*’s emphasis on *ekayāna* and skill-in-means (*upāya*) indicates shared relations with the *Lotus sūtra*.