

The Irreversible Bodhisattva (*avaivartika*) in the Lotus *sūtra* and *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*.

James B. Apple

Introduction

Irreversible (*avaivartika*) bodhisattvas are regarded as prestigious figures within Mahāyāna literature as they are generally thought to be incapable of turning back from attaining full Buddhahood. Different texts, however, vary in their description of the irreversible bodhisattva. Some texts like the *Sukhāvativyūha* place emphasis on their vows to save sentient beings while other texts like the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* represent them as householders skilled in the cognition of emptiness and non-duality. The following discussion examines the characteristics and qualities of irreversible bodhisattvas found in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* (hereafter *Lotus sūtra*) and compares these characteristics to the qualities of the irreversible bodhisattva found in the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* (“teaching on the doctrine of non-retrogression”). The comparison between these two sutras’ portrayal of the irreversible bodhisattva illustrates underlying similarities in how the irreversible bodhisattva is conceived but also clarifies important differences in practices and attainments that indicate a more nuanced vision of this type of bodhisattva among two different authorial communities in Mahāyāna literature.

In order to understand the context of the *Lotus sūtra* and *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*’s portrayal of irreversible bodhisattvas, and how this contrasts against early mainstream and Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism, I will initially provide a short outline of the bodhisattva ideal in mainstream Buddhist discourse and Mahāyāna *sūtra* discourses followed by a brief overview of irreversible bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna

sūtras. I will then describe the narrative context and status of irreversible bodhisattvas in the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaiivartikacakra-sūtra* and then compare how these *sūtras* utilize the category of the irreversible bodhisattva in their depiction of the bodhisattva way.

The Bodhisattva in Mainstream and Early Mahāyāna Buddhist Discourse

The Buddhist literature that comes to be classified by traditional as well as modern scholars as “Mahāyāna *sūtras*” was formulated gradually over several centuries from slightly before the beginning of the common era. The authorial communities that composed this literature emerged from among mainstream Buddhist monastic groups, i.e. the Nikāya ordination lineages. Although the authorial communities who compiled “Mahāyāna” Buddhist texts were from a culture that shared in the common Buddhist literary heritage of mainstream forms of Buddhism, that is, the texts of the Nikāya-Āgama corpus, these authors were rewriting this literary heritage towards a new vision of the goal of the Buddha’s teachings, the path leading to this goal, and the type of individual who took up the path towards this goal.

The new goal within emerging groups during this time period was the attainment of full awakening leading to Buddhahood rather than the mainstream Buddhist spiritual goal of *nirvāṇa* resulting in the state of *arhat*. The type of individual who strove to become a Buddha was known as a *bodhisattva*. Early forms of Buddhism knew of *bodhisattva* figures, but *bodhisattvas* in this early context referred to the lifetimes of individuals like Śākyamuni during the time period before his attainment of Buddhahood. For a number of early followers of the Buddha, the lifetimes he spent as a *bodhisattva* was something to venerate but not emulate, as the path of a bodhisattva was not yet an ideal for followers of a Buddha to practice. The sole path to be followed for early Buddhists was the path of arhatship that led to *nirvāṇa*, i.e. final liberation from the cycle of repeated birth and death. In early forms of Buddhism, the quality of the attainment of *nirvāṇa* was equal and identical between the Buddha and his followers, what differed was the fact that Śākyamuni had discovered the path leading to *nirvāṇa* by himself. However, over time, and due to a number of complex cultural

conditions in South Asia, the Buddha and his status as an awakened being became increasingly glorified and a breach developed between the status and value of arhatship in comparison to the prestigious goal of full Buddhahood among some groups of Buddhist followers. Some Buddhists began to seek out the goal of full Buddhahood over the “lesser” aim of arhatship. Influenced by the stories of Śākyamuni’s previous lifetimes found in the *Jātaka* tales (“birth-stories”) that exemplified his previous vows, ascetic practices, and virtues (*pāramitā*), Buddhists interested in pursuing the attainment of full Buddhahood began to conceive and envision the qualities and practices that would constitute such an attainment, in other words, the notion of the bodhisattva path began to emerge, a notion that was unknown in the Buddha’s own lifetime (Nattier 2003:41). Early models of the bodhisattva path considered the way to full Buddhahood as a long and arduous journey over countless lifetimes to be undertaken by only the few who were fit, resolute, and committed for the journey. Based on the narratives found in the *Jātaka* stories, an aspiring bodhisattva could anticipate lifetimes of compassionate self-sacrificial acts, such as offering his body to be cut to pieces by an evil king (i.e., *Kṣāntivādin-jātaka*) or giving away his limbs to a hungry tigress (i.e., *Vyāghri-jātaka*), as well as lifetimes of practicing ascetic cultivations and moral virtues. Such acts would develop the awakened qualities and accrue the merit necessary for eventually becoming a Buddha. Influenced by such stories, 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, communities of Buddhist monastics began to envision and imagine the elements and structures that constituted a bodhisattva’s way to full buddhahood.

However, the historical developments in formulating the bodhisattva way among early Buddhist communities were never documented in written form and took place “off-camera” (Nattier 2003:13) during an “intertestamental period between the closing of the canons of the various Nikāya Buddhist lineages and the composition of the earliest Mahāyāna *sūtras*” (Nattier 2003:100). The earliest extant versions of *sūtras* that come to be classified as “Mahāyāna” *sūtras*,

preserved among early Chinese translations by the second century Indo-Scythian translator Lokakṣema (支婁迦讖 *Zhi lou-jia-chen*), represent the early stages of subsequent development and refinement of the initial bodhisattva movement. Harrison (1993:140), who analysed a corpus of eleven early Mahāyāna texts that were translated by Lokakṣema into Chinese in the middle of the second century c.e., states that the earliest Mahāyāna texts that reached China during this time were “far from being the first outpourings of the movement” and “represent a fairly advanced stage in a long literary tradition” which he characterized as “Early Middle Mahāyāna.”

Although an exact chronology of historical development for the beginnings of Mahāyāna formations cannot be known, inferences from the textual analysis of Lokakṣema’s corpus of translations along with analysis of recent manuscript finds in “Greater Gandhāra” (Allen and Salomon 2010; Falk and Karashima 2012) and discoveries in the Bajaur district in North-West Pakistan (Strauch 2010) provide the earliest textual evidence for descriptions of the bodhisattva path. Based upon an analysis of Lokakṣema’s translations (Harrison 1993:170–172) and the Bajaur manuscript collection (Strauch 2010), one finds four key stages that are demarcated throughout this early textual material that constitute the most basic elements in the path of a bodhisattva. These key stages are: (1) the arising of the thought of awakening (*bodhicittotpāda*), when a person first aspires to attain the state of Buddhahood and thereby becomes a bodhisattva; (2) endurance towards the fact that things are not produced (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*); (3) the attainment of the status of irreversibility or non-retrogression (*avaivartika*) from Buddhahood; and (4) the prediction (*vyākaraṇa*), the event when a Buddha predicts the time and place of a bodhisattva’s subsequent awakening.

Among these four stages, the attainment of the status of irreversibility or non-retrogression (*avaivartika*) is of great importance as it signifies that a bodhisattva is close to awakening and has reached a point in his or her career after which there can be no turning back from the attainment of full Buddhahood. As will be discussed below, the attainment of non-retrogression is closely related to the other three key stages of the bodhisattva’s path and signifies that a bodhisattva is

endowed with special qualities that differentiate them from fledgling bodhisattvas. Judging from its occurrence and context in Mahāyāna texts, the status of irreversibility was sought after by many in the communities oriented toward the bodhisattva path as texts often describe the signs of those who have attained the esteemed state and the context of the term's appearance often conveys an assurance of stability for the bodhisattva struggling to reach full Buddhahood. Moreover, the key stage of *avaivartika* becomes so firmly established as a prestigious attainment in the bodhisattva path that it is mentioned in most, if not all, later Mahāyāna *sūtras* without further comment.

Avaivartika Bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna sūtra Discourse

As mentioned above, the term *avaivartika* and its multiple Indic equivalents (Apple 2011: 121) are found in a great number of texts that become classified as Mahāyāna *sūtras* and generally signifies that a bodhisattva can no longer turn back from the attainment of full Buddhahood. Even so, *avaivartika* is a polysemous term that may have multiple and variant connotations as indicated by the fact that early Chinese translations by Lokakṣema and his team of translators transliterated the term as either 阿惟越致 *a wei yue zhi* or translated it into Chinese as 不退 *bu tui* “non-regression” in addition to the term’s multifaceted connotation in Mahāyāna discourses (Apple 2011). The most thorough, and perhaps the earliest known, discussion of *avaivartika* and its relation to bodhisattvas occurs throughout the literature of the *prajñāpāramitā*, from the earliest fragments of the first century Gāndhārī *Prajñāpāramitā* (G. *prañāparamida*) (Falk and Karashima 2012, 2013) up through later *prajñāpāramitā* discourses such as the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*.

The earliest extant full version of a *prajñāpāramitā* discourse that provides evidence for how early authorial communities constructed the bodhisattva path and thought about the practices, doctrines, and goals of bodhisattva movements is the second-century Chinese translation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā* by Lokakṣema, the *Daoxing Banruo Jing* 道行般若經 (Karashima 2011). Nevertheless, as mentioned above, this version of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā* translated by Lokakṣema provides evidence for developments that had

already occurred but were not the initial developments of this literature. As the recent work of Falk and Karashima (2012, 2013) demonstrates, the Gāndhārī fragments provide a copy of a *prajñāpāramitā* that is older than Lokakṣema's text and the footnotes of Karashima's critical edition of Lokakṣema's translation demonstrates how the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā* expanded and changed over time. In brief, Mahāyāna texts fluctuated over time and through critical analysis of their content and structure early layers of their formation may be theorized and later developments documented.

The earliest layers of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā* are thought to consist of its first two chapters (Conze 1978:28-30; Verboom 1998:41–43) and an early description of the *avaivartika* bodhisattva is found within this stratum. In this early layer, the attainment of non-retrogression or *avaivartika* is related to dwelling in and not turning back from a concentration (*samādhi*) that does not grasp at anything at all (*sarvadharmāparigṛhīta*) (Conze 1975:85). Attaining this concentration leads to the bodhisattva's prediction to become fully awakened to perfect awakening (Verboom 1998:247). As the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* expanded over time, the discussion of the *avaivartika bodhisattva* focused upon the rarity of the attainment of non-retrogression, their status as a field of merit, and the signs and characteristics which enable one to recognize such a bodhisattva. A lengthy exposition on the signs and characteristics of the irreversible bodhisattva is found in Chapter 15 of the *Daoxing jing* (Chapter 17 in Sanskrit). Irreversible bodhisattvas have cognitive levels of understanding equal to arhats (T 224: 430z16–18; 450b14–17; 454b17–18). They will never be reborn as women (T 224:458a18–19) nor in places of suffering (T 224: 454b27). They practice, even in dreams, the path of ten wholesome actions (T 224:454b1), but do not make offerings to gods (454b26–27) nor take delight in donations (T 224:454c15). The irreversible bodhisattva of the *Daoxing jing* practices the four dhyānas (455c13) and focuses on the truth (454c7). They proclaim the Perfection of Wisdom (461c26–28) and teach others to maintain the ten precepts (454c1–2). In brief, the irreversible bodhisattva is described as an exemplary monk with a special interest in the *prajñāpāramitā* who cannot backslide from the vocation of practicing the bodhisattva path to become a full Buddha.

Besides these signs and characteristics of the irreversible bodhisattva found in the *Daoxing jing*, perhaps the most important aspect of the *Daoxing jing*'s understanding of irreversible bodhisattvas is related to the theme of prediction. The theme of prediction occurs in the early "Mahāyāna" Bajaur manuscript (Strauch 2010:47–51) as well as in all of Lokakṣema's translations (Harrison 1993:172). According to Fronsdal (1998: 254) the *Daoxing jing* exhibits the most concern with prediction among all of Lokakṣema's translations. Since there did not exist a historical Buddha in India during the formative period of bodhisattva movements, early *sūtras* like the *Daoxing jing* assumed that at least some followers had received a prediction for Buddhahood from one of the innumerable Buddhas in the past (Fronsdal 1998:266). The *Daoxing jing* (T 224:426c21; Conze 1975: 87) states: "All the bodhisattvas who have realized the irreversible stage have obtained their prediction to Buddhahood from the Buddhas in the past."

The important relation between prediction and irreversibility is aptly stated by Fronsdal (1998:267) who points out that:

"For the early Perfection of Wisdom community a key issue was not whether one should decide to pursue the Bodhisattva path; rather it was whether or not one had already entered the Bodhisattva path by virtue of having received a prediction in the distant past, many lifetimes ago. 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."

In sum, the discussion in the *Daoxing jing* of irreversible bodhisattvas centers around the theme of prediction and recognizable characteristics and signs that may indicate receiving a prediction. This text does not place the status of irreversibility within a systemized structure of hierarchical bodhisattva stages. Rather, the categorization of various bodhisattvas into irreversible status in the *Daoxing jing* hinges on whether or not one has received a prediction. This mode of categorization indicates, as previously mentioned, that the authorial communities of the *prajñāpāramitā* as represented by the *Daoxing jing* were patterning their construction of the bodhisattva path along the

lines of structures found in *Jātakas* and *Avadānas* (“miraculous tales”) of the life of Śākyamuni Buddha who had received a prediction from the Buddha Dīpaṅkara in his previous lives.

The *Daoxing jing* therefore provides an early model of how Mahāyāna Buddhist authorial communities constructed the bodhisattva path leading to Buddhahood with key stages related to the themes of irreversibility and prediction. The *Daoxing jing* demonstrates the significance and prestigious status that irreversible bodhisattvas had for early Mahāyāna Buddhist authorial communities. As I will discuss in the following sections, the category of the irreversible bodhisattva was a firmly established bodhisattva level of distinction that Mahāyāna authorial communities recognized and thought about in negotiating how to conceive of the path to Buddhahood. The category of *avaivartika bodhisattva* was one of the most significant floating group of concepts that various Mahāyāna Buddhist authorial communities utilized in addressing problems that confronted them in envisioning the way of a bodhisattva.

A good example of how Mahāyāna authorial communities recognized the category of irreversible bodhisattva, but contended for different visions of the bodhisattva way, is found in a comparison between the place of *avaivartika bodhisattvas* in the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*. A comparison of the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* provides a good case study because both of these *sūtras* represent a second layer of early to middle period (from the first to third century c.e.) Mahāyāna developments where Mahāyāna interest groups were beginning to more clearly articulate their differences from conservative mainstream forms of Buddhism but still had to address how bodhisattvas become Buddhas. Both *sūtras* were compiled before the ten stages of a bodhisattva system and the “three bodies” of a Buddha had been fully developed yet they both have a number of interrelated concerns and intertextual relations.

I have demonstrated (Apple 2012) several common narrative elements which the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* share. Both *sūtras* place emphasis on *ekayāna* (“one vehicle”), the idea that all beings are destined for Buddhahood, and skill-in-means (*upāya*) as a technique of teaching other beings. The *sūtras* share the literary

motif of bodhisattvas “emerging from the gaps of the earth” and the idea that two Buddhas may appear at the same time. Both *sūtras* also have episodes that involve gender transformation (Chapter 15 ‘Lion woman’ in the *Avaiartikacakra* and the episode of the nāga king’s daughter in Chapter 12 of the *Lotus sūtra*). They both use distortions of time and space to emphasize the magnimity of their teaching. This correlation of subject matter between the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaiartikacakra* would lead some Chinese cataloges to list the *sūtras* together within a single section (See Demiéville, *Choix d’études bouddhiques*, 1929–1970, page 192, §2111. IV). These shared traits demonstrate that the authorial communities of these *sūtras* had a shared literary heritage and were aware of each other’s works. However, both *sūtras* were working to solve different problems in formulating the new vision of the bodhisattva way. The place of *avaiartika bodhisattvas* in these two *sūtras* will illustrate the points of difference early authorial communities had with regard to the nature of the bodhisattva path.

Irreversible bodhisattvas in the *Lotus sūtra*¹

The *Lotus sūtra* contains several passages related to irreversible bodhisattvas, but similar to other *sūtras* found in the Lokakṣema corpus, there is not a systemized hierarchical structure of bodhisattva stages. Rather, like other early to middle period bodhisattva *sūtras*, the *Lotus sūtra* compares the cognitive knowledge of irreversible bodhisattvas to arhats and pratyekabuddhas, grants the status of irreversible to those who accept the *sūtra*, and marks this status in relation to prediction episodes.

Like the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā* and other Mahāyāna texts, the *Lotus sūtra* was gradually composed through a process of stages as initially proposed by Fuse Kōgaku (1934) and tentatively

1 This section reproduces material (pp. 129–133) from my article, “On Avaiartika and Avaiartikacakra in Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature with special reference to the Lotus Sūtra.” *Bulletin of The Institute of Oriental Philosophy*, No. 27, pp. 119–147, 2011.

refined by Seishi Karashima into four stages of formation.² The earliest formative layers of the *Lotus sūtra* mention the irreversible bodhisattva as a number of citations are found within the first stages of the *sūtra*'s development. The earliest references to the irreversible bodhisattva are found in Chapters Two and Three of the *Lotus sūtra*. In Chapter Two (2.17) the irreversible bodhisattva comes at the end of a list of beings who are unable to cognize *buddhajñāna*. The list begins with *adhimukti* bodhisattvas (2.7), arhats (2.8), beings like Śārisuta (2.9), Pratyekabuddhas (2.12), newly set out bodhisattvas (*navayānasamprasthita bodhisattvāḥ*) (2.14), and then irreversible or non-regressing bodhisattvas (*avivartikā*) (2.17).³ Similar to the *Daoxing jing*, this early portion of the *Lotus sūtra* implicitly differentiates the irreversible bodhisattva among a typology of bodhisattvas who are more advanced than mainstream Buddhist figures such as the arhat but are not equal to a Buddha.

In Chapter Three (3.90) the irreversible bodhisattva is listed with Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas who will receive, if they follow the *Lotus sūtra*, the single Buddha-vehicle.⁴ Another set of verses in Chapter Three, similar to statements in other early Mahāyāna texts, presupposes that followers of the *Lotus sūtra* must have served previous Buddhas in previous lifetimes and that if they have utmost faith in the *Lotus sūtra* they will be considered to be *avaivartika* bodhisattvas (3.106–107).⁵

The occurrences of *avaivartika* in the *Lotus sūtra* are also related to predictions. This is most evident in the early layers of the

2 The theory for the gradual formation of the *Lotus sūtra* was initially proposed by Fuse Kōgaku (1934) with similar remarks by Rawlinson (1977). This theory is refined in the works of Karashima (1991, 1993, 2001) and Kajiyama (2000) who propose four stages of formation for the *Lotus sūtra* as follows: (1) Triṣṭubh-Jagatī verses, found in chapters from the Upāyakaśūlyā- (II) to the Vyākaraṇa-parivarta (IX); (2) Śloka verse and prose, found in those chapters; (3) Chapters from the Dharmabhāṇaka-(X) to the Tathāgatarddhyabhisamskāraparivarta (XX), as well as Nidāna-(I) and Anuparīdanā-parivarta (XXVII); (4) The other chapters (XXI–XXVI) and the latter half of the Stūpaśaṃdarśanaparivarta (XI), i.e. the so-called Devadatta-parivarta.

3 *Saddharmaṃṇḍarika* 2.7–2.18 (KN 31.5–32.14).

4 *Saddharmaṃṇḍarika* 3.90 (KN 90.7–8); Burnouf 1925:57 at 3.84.

5 *Saddharmaṃṇḍarika* 3.106–107 (KN 93.1–5); Burnouf 1925: 59 at 3.100.

sūtra in the sixth chapter on prediction (*vyākaraṇa*). In the Buddha's prediction of Subhūti to one day become a Buddha, Subhūti's future Buddhafield is described as containing many bodhisattvas who "turn the wheel that never rolls back" (6.21).⁶ Likewise, the prediction of Mahāmaudgalyāyana to become one day the Buddha Tamālapatrakandanagandha mentions that this Buddha will have numerous Arhats among his disciples and, in addition, there will appear numerous *avaivartika* bodhisattvas (6.36–37).⁷

Occurrences of *avaivartika* within stage three (see footnote 2) of the *sūtra*'s development (that is, *Dharmabhāṇaka*-(X) to the *Tathāgatarddhyabhisamkāraparivarta* (XX), as well as *Nidāna*-(I) and *Anuṣarīdanā-parivarta* (XXVII)) are also very similar to occurrences in early stages. In chapter 11 of the Sanskrit (Chapter 12 in Kumārajīva), Śāriputra, voicing a mainstream Buddhist view, tells the daughter of the Nāga king that even though she has irreversibly conceived of the spirit for awakening, the bodhisattva path is impossible for women. This is because women, according to Śāriputra, are unable to attain the status of (1.) Brahma, (2.) Indra, (3.) chief guardian of the four quarters, (4.) a cakravartin king or the status of (5.) an irreversible bodhisattva. In Dharmarakṣa's translation the fifth status is listed as *mahāsattva* (大士, T. 263:106a16), but in Kumārajīva's translation the fifth status is not *avaivartika* but that of a Buddha (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 184). The interchange of *avaivartika* with Buddha between the Sanskrit and Kumārajīva's translations illustrates the great status *avaivartika* bodhisattvas had at this stage of the *Lotus sūtra*'s development. More importantly, in describing the qualities of the Nāga king's daughter to the bodhisattva Prajñākūṭa ("Wisdom Accumulation"), Mañjuśrī states that in one moment she produced the thought of awakening and attained the status of non-retrogression (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 183). The Nāga king's daughter then appears to the assembled multitude, gives a precious gem to the Buddha, and then transforms into a man to become a Buddha in the southern world-sphere known as Spotless. Seeing the Nāga king's daughter

6 *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka* 6.21 (KN 149.13–14).

7 *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka* 6.36–37 (KN 155.1–4).

achieve Buddhahood, incalculable beings attained the state of non-retrogression. This episode indicates that the status of irreversibility or non-retrogression is held in high esteem among the *Lotus sūtra*'s authorial community as well as its audience as non-retrogression is a state that both the Nāga king's daughter attains and members of the assembled multitude attain as a result of hearing and understanding the *Lotus sūtra*. Along these lines, Chapter 13 verse 64 in the Sanskrit (Kumārajīva Chapter 14, T. 262, 39b) mentions the attainment of *dhārāṇī* with "irreversible" qualities when the Buddha speaks of those who uphold the *Lotus sūtra* and "attain the power of recollection and the knowledge of non-retrogression."⁸

The only occurrence of *avaivartika* in relation to *bhūmi* ("ground" or "stage") in the *Lotus sūtra* appears in the Duration of the Tathāgata's Lifespan Chapter (Chapter 15 Sanskrit, Chapter 16 Kumārajīva, T. 262, 42b) where the bodhisattva-māhasattva Maitreya along with a great number of bodhisattvas explain to the Buddha that they are incapable of comprehending an analogy given for length of the Buddha's lifespan, even while standing on the stage of non-regression.⁹ This passage indicates that the stage of non-regression is attained by high level bodhisattva mahāsattvas like Maitreya. But the context does not indicate what the intended audience knew of this stage other than the ostensive meaning that non-regression marks a point in the career of a bodhisattva that, once reached, indicates that there can be no turning back from the achievement of Buddhahood. Similar to other early to mid-level *sūtras*, the *Lotus sūtra* does not know of an organized sequence of *bhūmis* found in other texts like the *Daśabhūmika sūtra* (十地經) chapter of the *Avataṃsaka sūtra*. The term *bhūmi* occurs around 36 times in the *Lotus sūtra* (See Ejima et al, 1985: 781), usually in compounds beginning with *arhat-*, *śrāvaka-*, *pratyeka-buddha-*, *bodhisattva-*, *śaikṣa-*, and *avaivartya-*. But an organized

8 *Saddharmaṇḍarīka* 13.64 (KN 294.7–8): *so ca prahr̥ṣṭo bhavati śruṇitvā prāmodyajātaśca karoti pūjām /supine ca so dhāraṇi prāpuṇoti avivartiyam jñāna spr̥ṣitva kṣipram // 13.64 //* Karashima (2005:131) notes several interesting variants on this verse, XIII § 24, (Gilgit) *avivartiyam jñāna spr̥ṣisyase* (p. 131), (Khādaliq) *avaivartikam jñāna spr̥ṣitva* (p. 132), (F) *avivartokam jñāna [s]pr̥ṣitva* (p. 134).

9 *Saddharmaṇḍarīka* 15, tathāgatāyuspramāṇaparivartah (KN 316.12–317.4).

sequence of *bhūmis* does not belong to the strand of bodhisattva literature followed by the authorial community of the *Lotus sūtra*.

The preceding discussion of occurrences of *avaivartika* bodhisattva in the *Lotus sūtra* has several implications for understanding this type of bodhisattva within its narrative context. The *Lotus sūtra* provisionally accepts the category of irreversible bodhisattva as a term of high status in many of the parables and teaching episodes throughout the *sūtra*. The attainment of irreversibility is revered in the *Lotus sūtra* for those who accept and have faith in the *Lotus sūtra*. Those bodhisattvas like the Nāga king's daughter who actualize Buddhahood based on hearing and understanding the *Lotus sūtra*, as well as traditional mainstream Buddhist figures like the arhats who receive predictions from the Buddha, are granted upon their attainment of Buddhahood audiences of followers who are *avaivartika* bodhisattvas. This scenario would be comparable to a modern day graduate student being guaranteed a full professorship immediately upon attaining a Ph.D. whereby all of his or her future courses would consist only of seminars with advanced graduate students who themselves were guaranteed full professorships. Indeed, the *Lotus sūtra* grants favorable conditions of Buddhahood for its followers.

However, even though the status of *avaivartika* is accepted in the *Lotus sūtra*, the attainment is "democratized" (Nattier 2009:99) in the context of the *sūtra*'s advocacy of one single vehicle and the attainment of Buddhahood for everyone who has faith or devotion toward the *Lotus sūtra*. The *Lotus sūtra* recognizes the traditional stages of attainment found in mainstream Buddhism and earlier Mahāyāna discourses, from the stage of stream-enterer up through to the highest level bodhisattva, like the *avaivartika bodhisattva*, as workable categories inherited from early forms of mainstream and Mahāyāna Buddhism. However, the *Lotus sūtra* sweeps these hierarchical attainments aside in the egalitarian teaching of the one vehicle along with the notion that all who accept the *Lotus sūtra* will attain full buddhahood (Nattier 2009:99). The *Lotus sūtra*'s approach to traditional mainstream and Mahāyāna Buddhist hierarchical categories of spiritual attainment differs from that of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*. As will be discussed in the following section, the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* will

transform the traditional categories of mainstream hierarchical attainment to the status of *avaivartika* bodhisattva in a skilful manner that is more congruent with traditional understandings of progress on the Buddhist path.

Irreversible bodhisattvas in the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra*

The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*¹⁰ (Pk.906; Derge 240) 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” (*avaivartika-dharmacakra*) where, like the *Lotus sūtra*, all beings are destined for Buddhahood. However, in the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* the Buddha articulates to Ānanda that when he refers to *śrāvaka* stages of mainstream Buddhist attainment, stages such as the Stream-enterer, Once-returner, Non-returner, and Arhat, he is actually making reference to irreversible bodhisattvas. Rather than accepting mainstream Buddhist categories of attainment, and then dismissing them in the context of one single vehicle (*ekayāna*) as in the *Lotus sūtra*, the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* rewrites and transforms these categories through the rhetorical technique of semantic elucidation (skt. *nirukta*) with the ostensive message that the Buddha utilizes skill-in-means through his use of allegorical speech (Tib. *ldem po ngag*).

10 See Apple (2004, 2008, 2011) and Handurukande (1973) for an overview of this *sūtra*. The Sanskrit title is found in the *Abhisamayālamkāra* commentaries of both Arya-Vimuktisena and Haribhadra. 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, *Abhisamayālamkāra'ālokā prajñāpāramitāvyaḥkhyā: (Commentary on Astasahasrikā-prajñāpāramitā)* (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1932), page 36.8: “*avaivartikacakra sūtra*.” The *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* is preserved in Chinese, Tibetan, Manchu, and Mongolian translations. Three translations of this *sūtra* are preserved in Chinese. The first is the *Aweiyuezhizhe jing* 阿惟越致遮經 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, 284 c.e.) in Dunhuang (敦煌). The second translation is the *Butuizhuanfalun jing* 不退轉法輪經 translated during the Northern Liang dynasty (北涼) (412–439 c.e.). The third translation is the *Guangboyanjing butuizhuanlun jing* 廣博嚴淨不退轉法輪經 translated by 智嚴 Zhi-yan during the 4th year of Yuan Jia (元嘉), Liu Song dynasty (劉宋) (427 c.e.) in Zhi-yuan Monastery (枳園寺) in Yang-du (楊都).

In Chapters 2 through Chapter 10 of this *sūtra*, the Buddha articulates to Ānanda that when he discusses *śrāvaka* stages of the path the Buddha is actually making reference to irreversible bodhisattvas. In the *sūtra*, the Buddha gives a whole prose discourse on a certain type of *bodhisattva* who obtains the status name from *śrāvaka* terminology, say for instance the *śraddhānusārin*, a “follower by way of faith.” After the Buddha gives a discourse as to why a *bodhisattva* takes up the name of whichever type of *śrāvaka*, the Buddha proclaims a number of stanzas that provide a summary of the particular “re-defined” term. According to the normative representation of this *sūtra*, the Buddha here skillfully creates notions or perceptions (*saṃjñā*) of stages of traditional mainstream Buddhist categories of progression, such as the Followers-of-Dharma, Once-returner, Non-returner, Arhat, or Pratyekabuddha as a form of encouraging beings to progress towards attaining a *śrāvaka* goal and then informs his audience that rather than heading toward the attainment of *nirvāṇa*, they are actually irreversible from *anuttara-samyak-saṃbodhi*, unsurpassable complete full awakening.

A specific example found in the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* would be of the Follower-of-Dharma (*dharmānusārin*). In mainstream forms of Buddhism, particularly in Abhidharma discourse, a Follower-of-Dharma, ‘One who follows by way of Doctrine,’ is an enterer to the result of Stream-enterer who has sharp faculties (*tikṣṇendriya*), and does not rely on another to pursue cognition of the Nobles’ Four Truths (Apple 2008). The Follower-of-Dharma is at least seven lifetimes away from *nirvāṇa* as this stage of spiritual progress is a type of Stream-enterer in mainstream forms of Buddhism.

In the discourse of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* the Follower-of-Dharma is “one who follows the stream of inconceivable dharmas” (Taipei 240, fol. 502, *chos rjes ’brang zhes gsungs/ chos rgyun bsam gyis mi khyab pa* ≈ acintya-dharma-śrota-anusāri) and is irreversibly bound to attain the omniscient knowledge of a Buddha (*buddha-jñāna*) or “the

great knowledge” (*mahājñāna*).¹¹ The *sūtra* redefines the term “Follower-of-Dharma” and connects it with being an irreversible bodhi-sattva by means of semantic elucidation (*nirvacana*) or word-plays (Apple 2009) on the term *dharma* as the following few verses from the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra* demonstrate:

- [1] One who does not turn away from
the Buddha qualities (*buddhadharma*) in any way and
apprehends (*dhāraṇa*) their true nature (*dharmatā*).
is therefore called a Follower-of-Dharma (*dharmānusārin*).
- [2] The stream of things (*dharmasrota*) is inconceivable
One who does not even pass beyond that stream
And obtains the reality of things (*dharmatā*)
Is therefore called a Follower-of-Dharma
- [3] One who apprehends (*dhāraṇa*) and respects
the *dharma* that is explained by the Buddhas
and whose mind is fearless
is therefore called a Follower-of-Dharma¹²

11 Karashima (2001a: 170, footnote 115; 2001b: §2.7, 215–217) theorizes that the term *mahāyāna* was initially *mahājñāna* (“the great knowledge”) and meant “buddha-knowledge” (*buddha-jñāna*). He proposes that the *Lotus sūtra* in origin proclaimed that everyone could obtain *buddha-jñāna* and that the *sūtra* shows the equality of great knowledge (*mahājñāna*) based on analysis of Central Asian manuscripts and Chinese translations of the *Lotus sūtra*. It is interesting to note here that toward the end of the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra* the Buddha proclaims to Ananda an alternative title to the *sūtra* as “the teaching on great knowledge” (*ye shes chen po ≈ mahājñāna*) (*Avaiartikacakra-sūtra*, Chapter 18D, (Derge 301a2): *kun dga’ bo de lta bas na chos kyi rnam grangs ’di ... phyir mi ldog pa’i ’khor lo ye shes chen po bstan pa zhes bya bar yang zung shig*).

12 *Avaiartikacakra-sūtra* Chapter 3C, verses 1–3 (S 323b1): 1] /sangs rgyas chos la rnam kun tu/ /chos las ldog par [323b1] mi byed cing //chos nyid ’di dag ’dzin byed de//de phyir chos rjes ’brang zhes gsungs/ [2]/chos rgyun bsam gyis mi khyab pa// rgyun de las kyang ’da’ mi byed//chos nyid de ni rjes su thob//de phyir chos rjes ’brang zhes gsungs/ [3]/sangs rgyas rnams kyis bshad pa’i chos//bsti stang byas te de dag ’ dzin//de yi sems ni zhum pa med/ /de phyir chos rjes ’brang zhes gsungs/

Although the connotations of Indic language word-play are difficult to discern from the Tibetan or Chinese translations of this *sūtra*, and perhaps would not be fully discernable to a Tibetan or Chinese listening or reading audience, discerning the probable underlying meaning and connotation for an Indic speaking audience through critical philological comparison and analysis (Nattier 2003:70–72) is possible. Such analysis indicates a number of points about this *sūtra*. The *sūtra* utilizes traditional mainstream Buddhist status markers of attainment and redefines them in terms of the bodhisattva way within the context of the single vehicle that leads to Buddhahood. The authorial community of the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra* was interested in re-describing bodhisattvas within mainstream Buddhist categories of attainment. They were hollowing out and re-defining the traditional terms of status found within mainstream hierarchical Buddhist structures. These status terms were transvalued to embody bodhisattva qualities and were redirected toward entering the Buddha-vehicle (*buddhayāna*) and following the Buddha-path to attain *buddha-dharmas* and *buddha-jñāna*. What this represents is skillful rhetorical tactics through semantic elucidation on the part of the authorial communities of this literature, to redefine and re-describe mainstream Buddhist ideal figures so as to accommodate them into the emergent ideology of universal accessibility to full complete awakening among the social movements that become classified as “Mahāyāna.” Notable, as well, is the absence of any discussion of bodhisattva stages in the *Avaiartikacakra*. As Lamotte (1998:43) notes, *sūtras* such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, *Pratyutpanna*, the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi*, *Vimalakīrti*, and the *Sukhāvativyūha* represent proto-Mahāyāna in the course of formation. The bodhisattva path at the time of the formulation of these *sūtras* was not complete, necessarily coherent, or structured into a systematic explanation of stages. In the case of the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra* the traditional categories of progressive spiritual attainment were accepted but redefined through semantic elucidation, allowing for all traditional Buddhist categories of attainment to be irreversible from Buddhahood.

Conclusion

The *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra* represent a

second layer of early to middle period Mahāyāna developments where Mahāyāna interest groups were still addressing how bodhisattvas become Buddhas and outlining the bodhisattva path against traditional mainstream forms of Buddhism. Both *sūtras* utilize the key stage of the irreversible bodhisattva in articulating their vision of the bodhisattva way to Buddhahood and incorporate this category into their use of skill-in-means in the context of the single vehicle (*ekayāna*) where all beings are destined for Buddhahood.

The *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* challenges basic assumptions about the Buddhist path shared by mainstream Buddhism's orientation toward the attainment of arhatship and *nirvāṇa* as well as early Mahāyāna Buddhist views of the newly developed way to Buddhahood. The overarching tradition in Buddhism, for mainstream Buddhists as well as early Mahāyāna groups, was to conceive of the path as a "prolonged process of step-by-step self-cultivation" (Nattier 2006:68). The *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* both speak of all Buddhist practitioners as irreversibly heading toward Buddhahood but convey the possibility of this attainment to their followers in different ways. The *Lotus sūtra* utilizes predictions and parables to demonstrate the power of its teaching to grant the attainment of non-retrogression to its followers. The status of irreversibility is honored in the *Lotus sūtra* as a prestigious attainment for those who accept and have faith in the *Lotus sūtra*. Along these lines, those bodhisattvas who actualize Buddhahood based on hearing and understanding the *Lotus sūtra* and the arhats who receive predictions from the Buddha in the *Lotus sūtra* are granted upon their attainment of Buddhahood multitudes of followers who are irreversible bodhisattvas. On the other hand, the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* rewrites and transforms traditional mainstream Buddhist categories of spiritual attainment through the rhetorical technique of semantic elucidation. All mainstream Buddhist followers who thought they had attained a stage among traditional categories of attainment such as the Stream-enterer, Once-returned, Non-returned, and Arhat on the way to *nirvāṇa* are actually irreversible bodhisattvas on the way to full Buddhahood. The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*, like the *Lotus sūtra*, teaches the single vehicle and advocates that all beings are irreversible from Buddhahood if one hears and has faith

in its teaching. However, unlike the *Lotus sūtra* which accepts mainstream Buddhist categories of attainment and then discards them in the egalitarian context of one single vehicle (*ekayāna*), the *Avai-vartikacakrasūtra* redefines and transforms these categories to indicate irreversible bodhisattvas who are progressing towards the state of Buddhahood. The *Avai-vartikacakrasūtra* therefore maintains the step-by-step progress structure of mainstream Buddhism but revises the end point of the journey as full Buddhahood rather than *nirvāṇa*. Alternatively, the *Lotus sūtra* advocates a leap philosophy (Nattier 2006; 2009) of sudden progress based on faith in the message of the *sūtra* itself. This is illustrated by the episode of the Nāga king's daughter who immediately attains Buddhahood based on her hearing and faith in the *Lotus sūtra*. In sum, the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avai-vartikacakrasūtra* both discuss irreversible bodhisattvas in the context of the single vehicle but have different visions of the place of irreversible bodhisattvas in their teaching of universal Buddhahood.

Bibliography and Abbreviations

Indian Sūtras

- Avai-vartikacakranāmamahāyānasūtra*. *Aweiyuezhizhe jing* 阿惟越致遮經 (T. no.266, 1) translated by Dharmarakṣa (284 c.e.). *Butuizhuanfalun jing* 不退轉法輪經 (T. no.267, 1) translated during the Northern Liang dynasty (北涼) (412–439 c.e.). *Guangboyanjing butuizhuanlun jing* 廣博嚴淨不退轉法輪經 (T. no. 268, 1) translated by 智嚴 Zhi-yan (427 c.e.). *'Phags pa phyir mi ldog pa'i 'khor lo zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*. Tōh. no.240. Dergé Kanjur, vol. ZHA, folios 241v.4–301v.7. Translated by Jinamitra, Dānaśīla, Munivarma, Ye shes sde.
- Saddharmapuṇḍarīkanāmamahāyānasūtra*. *Zhengfahua jing* 正法華經 (T. no.263, 9) translated by Dharmarakṣa (286 c.e.). *Miaofalianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 (T. no.262, 9), translated by Kumārajīva (406 c.e.). *Dam pa'i chos padma dkar po zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*. Tōh. no. 113. Dergé Kanjur, vol. JA, folios 1v.1–180v.7. Translated by Surendrabodhi and Snam Ye shes sde. For a Sanskrit version see KN (Kern and Nanjio 1908–12).

Modern Sources

- Allon, Mark and Richard Salomon. 2010. "New Evidence for Mahayana in Early Gandhāra." *The Eastern Buddhist* 41/1:1–22.
- Apple, James B. 2008. *Stairway to Nirvāṇa: A Study of the Twenty Saṅghas based on the works of Tsong-kha-pa* (State University of New York Press).
- Apple, James B. 2009. "Wordplay: Emergent Ideology through Semantic elucidation. A Rhetorical Technique in Mahāyāna Buddhist formations." *Bulletin of The Institute of Oriental Philosophy* 25: 161–173.
- Apple, James B. 2011. "On Avaivartika and Avaivartikacakra in Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature with special reference to the Lotus Sūtra." *Bulletin of The Institute of Oriental Philosophy*, No. 27, pp. 119–147.
- Apple, James B. 2012. "The Structure and Content of the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* and Its Relation to the *Lotus Sūtra*." *Bulletin of The Institute of Oriental Philosophy*, No. 28, pp. 155–174.
- Burnouf, Eugène. 1925. *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi, Traduit du Sanscrit, accompagné d'un Commentaire et de vingt et un Mémoires Relatifs au Bouddhisme*. Paris: Maisonneuve frères.
- Conze, Edward. 1975. *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary*. Four Seasons Foundation: San Francisco.
- Conze, Edward. 1978. *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*. Tokyo: The Reiyukai.
- Demiéville, Paul. 1973. *Choix d'études bouddhiques, 1929–1970*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Ejima, Yasunori, and Rentarō Ikeda. 1985. *Index to the Saddharmapūṇḍarīka-sūtra: Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese*. Tokyo: Reiyukai.
- Falk, Harry and Seishi Karashima. 2012. "A First-Century *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript from Gandhāra-*parivarta* 1 (Texts from the Split Collection 1)." *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 2011*, vol. 15, pp. 19–61.
- Falk, Harry and Seishi Karashima. 2013. "A First-Century *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript from Gandhāra-*parivarta* 5 (Texts from the Split Collection 2)." *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 2013*, vol. 15, pp. 97–169.
- Fronsdal, Egil. 1998. *The dawn of the Bodhisattva path: studies in a religious ideal of ancient Indian Buddhists with particular emphasis on the earliest*

- extant perfection of wisdom sutra*. Thesis (Ph. D.)—Stanford University.
- Fuse, Kōgaku 布施浩岳. 1934. *Hokekyō seiritsushi* 法華經成立史. Tōkyō: Daitō Shuppansha.
- Harrison, Paul M. 1993. “The Earliest Chinese Translations of Mahāyāna Buddhist Sūtras: some notes on the works of Lokakṣema,” *Buddhist Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 135–77.
- Handurukande, Ratna. 1973. “Avaivartacakra-Nāma-Mahāyāna-Sūtra.” *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* 2.3: 400–402.
- Karashima, Seishi. 2001a. “Who Composed the Lotus Sutra—Antagonism between wilderness and village monks—,” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism at Soka University for the Academic Year 2000*, vol. 4, pp. 143–79.
- Karashima, Seishi. 2001b. “Some Features of the Language of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīkasūtra*.” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 44: 207–230.
- Karashima, Seishi. 2005. “A Trilingual Edition of the Lotus Sutra—New editions of the Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese versions (3),” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism at Soka University for the Academic Year 2004*, vol. 8, pp. 105–190.
- Karashima, Seishi. 2011. *A Critical Edition of Lokakṣema’s Translation of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. Tokyo: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism, Soka University.
- KN = *Saddharma-puṇḍarīkasūtra*, ed. by Hendrik Kern and Bunyiu Nanjio, St. Petersburg 1908–12: Académie Imperiale des Sciences (Bibliotheca Buddhica X); Reprint: Tokyo 1977: Meicho-Fukyū-Kai.
- Kubo, Tsungunari and Akira Yuyama (trns). 2007. *The Lotus Sutra*. BDK English Tripiṭaka, 13–I. Berkeley, Calif: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.
- Lamotte, Étienne. 1944. *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna*. Volume 3 (pp.1119–1733), Louvain: Institut Orientaliste Louvain-la-Neuve.
- Lamotte, Étienne. 1976. *The Teaching of Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)*. Translated by Sara Boin. London: Pali Text Society.
- Lamotte, Étienne, and Sara Boin-Webb. 1998. *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra: The Concentration of Heroic Progress: An Early Mahāyāna Buddhist Scripture*. Surrey: Curzon Press.
- Nattier, Jan. 2003. *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path according to The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugra-pariprcchā)*. University of Hawai‘i Press: Honolulu.

- Nattier, Jan. 2006. "A Greater Awakening," *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 15, no. 3, pp. 65–69.
- Nattier, Jan. 2009. "Gender and Hierarchy in the *Lotus Sūtra*." Pp. 83–106 in Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline Ilyse Stone, *Readings of the Lotus Sutra*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rawlinson, Andrew. 1977. "The Position of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* in the Development of Early Mahāyāna," in *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems. Studies in Honor of Edward Conzed*, ed. Lewis Lancaster and Luis O. Gomez, Berkeley (The Center for South & Southeast Asian Studies, the University of California) (Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series 1).
- Strauch, Ingo. 2010. "More Missing Pieces of Early Pure Land Buddhism: New Evidence for Akṣobhya and Abhirati in an Early Mahayana Sutra from Gandhāra." *The Eastern Buddhist* 41/1:23–66.
- T = Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō 大正新脩大藏經, ed. J. Takakusu and K. Watanabe, 100 vols., Tokyo, 1924–34.
- Verboom, Arie Willem Cornelis. 1998. *A Text-comparative Research on 'the Perfection of Discriminating Insight in Eight Thousand Lines, Chapter 1'*. Leiden, Rijksuniv., Proefschr.

The Irreversible Bodhisattva (*avaivartika*) in the *Lotus sūtra* and *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*.

James B. Apple

Irreversible (*avaivartika*) bodhisattvas are regarded as prominent figures within Mahāyāna literature as they are generally thought to be incapable of turning back from attaining full Buddhahood. Different texts, however, vary in their description of the irreversible bodhisattva. Some texts like the *Sukhāvativyūha* place emphasis on their vows to save sentient beings while other texts like the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* represent them as householders skilled in the cognition of emptiness and non-duality. This paper examines the irreversible bodhisattva found in the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* and compares it to the qualities of the irreversible bodhisattva found in the *Lotus sūtra*. The comparison between these two sutras' portrayal of the irreversible bodhisattva illustrates underlying similarities in how the irreversible bodhisattva is conceived but also clarifies important differences in practices and attainments that provide for a more nuanced vision of this type of bodhisattva in Mahāyāna literature.