

The Single Vehicle (*ekayāna*) in the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra* and *Lotus Sūtra*.

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Introduction

The concept of the “single vehicle” (Skt. *ekayāna*, 一乘, Ch. *yīsheng*, Jpn. *ichijō*) is found in various Buddhist *sūtras* which are classified as “Mahāyāna”¹ *sūtras*, such as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, *Śrīmālādevīsīmaṅgānīkā*, and *Laṅkāvatāra*. In general, these *sūtras* utilize the term *ekayāna* in the sense of the “one path” or “one vehicle” that leads to full Buddhahood as opposed to other paths that are considered unreal. The *single vehicle* (*ekayāna*) is famously celebrated in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (hereafter, *Lotus Sūtra*), whose characterization of the *ekayāna* strongly influenced forms of Buddhism in East Asia, and continues to have an impact on present day knowledge of Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism. Other Mahāyāna discourses, however, vary in their description of the *ekayāna* and the concept has been subject to a number of diverse interpretations throughout the history of Buddhism. This paper examines the characteristics of *ekayāna* found in the *Lotus Sūtra* and compares these to the characteristics found in the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra* to gain a greater understanding of the notion of *ekayāna* in self-proclaimed Mahāyāna *sūtras* that become more prominent from the second century CE onwards.

1 Nattier (2003:10, 100–101) argues that labels such as “Mahāyāna *sūtra*” are “retrospective attributions” that obscure the social, historical, and contextual complexities of a given Dharma-discourse’s development among Buddhist communities. Nattier applies an alternative classification, “bodhisattva *sūtra*,” as well as proposing the theoretical model of “*sūtra*fication” to envision the processes of how a Dharma-discourse may have developed into a authentic text attributed to the Buddha.

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The Historical Development of the *Ekayāna* Concept

The concept of *ekayāna* slowly developed among a minority of Buddhist groups from around the mid-first century CE amid complex cultural changes in Indian society and Buddhist traditions during the rule of the Kuṣāṇas in the northwest areas of Greater Gandhāra and the Sātavāna dynasty in the south of India. 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. At some point in the early centuries before the Common Era, based on the narratives found in the Jātaka tales and Avadāna stories, communities of Buddhist monastics began to envision the bodhisattva's way to full Buddhahood through composing bodhisattva *sūtras* that were attributed to the Buddha and which speculated on how bodhisattvas could develop into Buddhas.

Associated with these developments, in addition to the Buddha's early followers known as *śrāvakas* (lit. "listeners") "disciples," Buddhist scholiasts began to incorporate the figure of the *pratyekabuddha* ("solitary buddha") into their narratives and scholastic categories. The ancient concept of the *pratyekabuddha* was initially shared with other non-Buddhist renunciate groups like the Jains (Norman 1983; Skilling 2004: 143n24). Over time Buddhists adapted the figure of the *pratyekabuddha* to account for attainment in cosmological periods when no Buddhas were present. The *pratyekabuddha* may have been a conceptual ideal to serve such cosmological, categorical, and narrative functions for, as Nattier (2003:139–40) suggests, "there is no evidence that actual Buddhists... ever considered themselves practitioners of the *pratyekabuddha* path." Scholars of Abhidharma and authorial communities of bodhisattva *sūtras* placed the *pratyekabuddha* in a middle rank between the lower level of *śrāvakas* and those who were aspiring for Buddhahood, the bodhisattvas. Thus, the idea of three types of individuals who follow three different pathways or vehicles developed in the early centuries before the Common Era among Buddhist communities.

Manuscript and inscriptional evidence support the idea of three vehicles as predominant among mainstream Buddhists in the first centuries of the Common Era. Among fifty-nine Gandharan Buddhist inscriptions, dating from the mid-second century BCE to the second

century CE, which enumerate the honorees and/or beneficiaries of the establishment of a relic, nine inscriptions (Baums 2012: nos. 9, 11, 17, 22, 23, 24, 30, and 36; Falk 2014:12–13) pay homage to all the Buddhas (G. *budha*), all *pratyekabuddhas* (G. *pracegasabudha*), and all arhats (G. *arahamta*, *arahadi*). The arhats, pratyekabuddhas, and buddhas are represented as three separate spiritual attainments, emblematic of the hierarchical placement of status states and their pathways during this period. Along these lines, a collection of Buddhist manuscripts found in the Bajaur area near Afghanistan written on birch bark in Kharoṣṭhī script that date back to the first or second century based on palaeographical evidence, include fragments which refer to three vehicles (*śravagayaṇa*, *praceabudhayāṇa*, *samasabudhayāṇa*) (Karashima 2013; Nasim Khan 2008). However, extant references to bodhisattvas in these manuscripts do not mention vehicles, but rather speak of bodhisattva training (Gāndhārī *bosisatvaśikṣā*, Skt. *bodhisattaśikṣā*; Strauch 2010:28). The three vehicle paradigm consisting of Buddhas, *pratyekabuddhas*, and *arhats/śrāvakas* was the dominant model. This three-tiered model of spiritual paths became accepted and followed by the majority of Nikāya ordination lineages, a phase in Buddhist history which recent scholarship has called “the period of the three vehicles.”²

The Period of the Three Vehicles

Among major developments during the period of the three vehicles, a time span from the first century BCE through the second century CE, some Buddhist groups spread out into Southeast, East, and Central Asia, some supported the sculpting of bodhisattva and Buddha images, some began to venerate the future Buddha Maitreya (Falk 2014), and some began emphasizing how to practice the bodhisattva path to full Buddhahood in early bodhisattva *sūtras* (Robinson, Johnson, Ṭhānissaro 2005:75). The earliest extant versions of such *sūtras* are found in Gāndhārī fragments (Karashima and Falk 2012, 2013) and in early Chinese translations completed before the end of the second century CE

2 Nattier (2007:182, note 4) notes that the phrase “the period of the three vehicles” was coined by Gil Fronsdal in a personal communication around the year 2000. The phrase appears for the first time in print in the fifth edition of Robinson, Johnson, and Ṭhānissaro’s *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*, 2005: 75.

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(Harrison 1987, 1993; Nattier 2003a). Several examples of these early bodhisattva *sūtras* that have been translated and studied are the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā* (Conze 1975; Karashima 2011), the *Akṣobhyavyūha* (Dantinne 1983, Nattier 2000), and the *Ugraparipṛcchā* (Nattier 2003a).

In the *Ugraparipṛcchā*, which Nattier suggests may date from the first century BCE, the three vehicles are treated as separate paths to separate goals (2003a:138–141; 174–176). The *Ugraparipṛcchā* considers the *śrāvaka* path an authentic way of practice that leads to the goal of Arhatship and is different from the state of Buddhahood. In this early bodhisattva *sūtra*, the *śrāvaka* path leading to the *nirvāṇa* of Arhatship and the bodhisattva path leading to the complete awakening of a Buddha are “two separate but overlapping options for Buddhist practice, leading to two separate and unequal goals” (Nattier 2003:141). Along these lines, in the *Akṣobhyavyūha* the eastern realm of Abhirati where the Buddha *Akṣobhya* presides is considered a location where the path of Arhatship is viable and can be easily attained, indicating that the “standard scenario of three vehicles” was assumed (Nattier 2000:94). These examples demonstrate that in early bodhisattva literature difficult practices leading to Buddhahood, that is, the bodhisattva path, were not an option for all, and that a Buddha’s primary job was still to ensure the success of *śrāvakas* in attaining Arhatship (Nattier 2003a, 88 n. 23). The notion that the *śrāvaka* path is not viable or authentic and that Buddhists should follow only the bodhisattva path, the “sole path” or “one vehicle,” that is, *ekayāna*, is also not found in these early bodhisattva *sūtras*.

Along these lines, the *Daoxing Banruo Jing* 道行般若經 (Karashima 2011; hereafter *Daoxing*), a second-century Chinese translation by Lokakṣema, is 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. In this early version of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, there is a brief discussion on three types of individuals and the path that they follow. The dialogue takes place between the Buddha’s disciples Subhūti and Śāriputra. Subhūti explains at length that all things, including the supreme Awakening of a Buddha, are empty (*śūnya*). Śāriputra responds as follows:

“According to Subhūti’s exposition of [the Buddha’s] teaching, there can be no one who attains bodhisattvahood. As the Buddha said, there are three kinds of virtuous people, those who seek arhatship, those who seek [the state of] pratyekabuddha, and those who seek Buddhahood. Those three are not to be considered as three. As Subhūti said, they belong to one and the same path.” (Daoxing, T.224, 454a19–21; Karashima 2011: 299–300).”

The term “one path” (一道) in Lokakṣema’s version appears in later Sanskrit versions as “one vehicle” (*ekam eva yānam*). Dharmapriya and Zhu Fonian’s translation in 382 CE qualifies “same path” with the Buddha-vehicle, the bodhisattva’s practice (T.266, 526b14: 一道佛衍菩薩事). The later Sanskrit version qualifies “one vehicle” with “the Buddha-vehicle, the Bodhisattva-vehicle (*yad uta buddhayānaṃ bodhisattvayānaṃ*)” (Karashima 2011:300n386). However, at the end of this particular dialogue, Subhūti (Daoxing, T.224, 454a25–29) dissolves the idea of even a single path being cognized in Suchness (Skt. *tathatā*) (cf. Harrison 1987:84). This dialogue within an early *prajñāpāramitā* discourse demonstrates that some groups, those who are represented in the voice of Śāriputra, were beginning to consider a “single” way through viewing the mainstream Buddhist understanding of the three types of individuals as being on the same Buddha path as bodhisattvas from the perspective of emptiness.

Another brief section of the Daoxing (T.224, 464b18–c7) also mentions a single way or same path (一道). Ānanda inquires about repenting of bad thoughts and the Buddha replies regarding how a bodhisattva should conduct himself with others. Then Ānanda asks how a bodhisattva should conduct himself toward other bodhisattvas and the Buddha responds by stating that a bodhisattva should look upon another bodhisattva thinking “We have one and the same teacher, one and the same ship, one and the same path” (T.224, 463c3 共一師, 共一船, 共一道; Karashima 2011:404). In Kumārajīva’s version, translated in 408 CE, the corresponding section reads “they ride on the same vehicle, they practice on the same path (T.227, 474a1 同載一乘, 共一道行; *ibid*). The later Sanskrit version reads “they have mounted on the same vehicle as I, have ascended the same path, are of like intention with me, have set out in

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the same vehicle as I” (*ibid*). These passages illustrate that early translations preserved in Chinese consider *ekayāna* as a single way or path that later becomes correlated with a “single vehicle” (*ekayāna*, 一乘). The context of these passages also shows that the concern is how bodhisattvas should act toward other bodhisattvas. The early use of single path/vehicle in this context is an expression of inclusiveness between bodhisattvas who have set out in the “same vehicle” (*samayāna*). As previous scholarship has demonstrated for a number of early bodhisattva *sūtras* (Harrison 1987:82; Nattier 2003:154–56), the concern of early bodhisattvas who aspired to the full awakening of a Buddha was to avoid falling to the level of a *śrāvaka* or *pratyekabuddha* while not offending practitioners who were following those pathways. In brief, while the details of the bodhisattva ideal and its path were being articulated, at this point among authorial communities of bodhisattva *sūtras*, the inclusion of other ways or vehicles had not yet developed.

The Greater Way of Bodhisattvas

In the later timeframe of the period of the three vehicles, based upon the number and content of texts that were translated into Chinese in the third century by scholars like Zhi Qian (支謙) and Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竺法護, fl. 265–309), more bodhisattva *sūtras* appear that praised and exalted the bodhisattva vehicle above the other two vehicles. Although a minority movement within Buddhist institutional communities, advocates of the bodhisattva vehicle (*bodhisattvayāna*) began to state that the way of the bodhisattva was a “greater way” or “great vehicle” (*mahāyāna*), an early epithet of admiration (Nattier 2003: 174n6) that soon became used with other synonyms such as buddha-vehicle (*buddhayāna*). As the above passages from the early Chinese translations of Lokakṣema demonstrate, *yāna* had a double meaning in the period of the three vehicles in that it could mean “vehicle” as well as “path.” Early Chinese translators employed the transliteration *māhēyan* (摩訶衍) or frequently used the translation *dadao* (大道), the “great way,” but some also used *dasheng* (大乘) “the great vehicle” (Durt 1994; Vetter 2014). This indicates that Indian Buddhist authorial communities who strongly advocated for the bodhisattva way played upon the double meaning of *yāna* in their rhetorical tropes and parables in generating support for

their movement.

However, the relations with other vehicles varied among bodhisattva interest groups. Some groups, while advocating the bodhisattva vehicle and upholding the traditional view of the three vehicles, granted that the Arhat or Pratyekabuddha achieves liberation from *samsāra* but assert that these goals were not praiseworthy. Other groups, like the authorial community of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (second century CE) depicted *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* as “men blind from birth” who are like “burnt seeds” (Lamotte 1976:149) with no hope for achieving full Buddhahood. On the other hand, some groups began to assert forms of bodhisattva universalism, a key defining feature of a number of bodhisattva movements that would later become identified with “the Mahāyāna.” These groups advocated that “the bodhisattva path is appropriate for all, and that all Buddhists either are, or should be, on that path” (Nattier 2003:175). These authorial communities insisted that the goals of Arhatship or Pratyekabuddhood were only illusions and that “all Buddhists (knowingly or unknowingly) are on the path to Buddhahood” (*ibid*). It is among these groups that the inclusivism of a “single path/vehicle” went beyond something that was shared between groups of bodhisattvas and began to include *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. As Nattier (*ibid*) points out, the concept of *ekayāna* is a strong form of bodhisattva universalism where only one path and one goal really exist. However, the bodhisattva interest groups who began to advocate an inclusive vision of the way to full Buddhahood to include other vehicles were among the minority of bodhisattvas.

One can infer that advocates of bodhisattva universalism were a minority based on the analysis of the term *ekayāna* as it appears in present day Buddhist canonical literature preserved in Chinese and Tibetan. As Nattier (2007:182) demonstrates in her analysis of the term “One vehicle” (*yisheng*, 一乘) in the Taishō canon, although there are over 6000 occurrences of the term, “No occurrence of *yisheng* can be found in a Buddhist text prior to the time of Dharmarakṣa...the pattern of distribution points to the likelihood that it was Dharmarakṣa himself who first introduced *yisheng* as the Chinese equivalent of Sanskrit (or Prakrit) *ekayāna*.” As Nattier concludes, before the time of Dharmarakṣa, “the very idea of a single vehicle seems to be absent from scriptures

translated into Chinese...” (*ibid* 183). I carried out a similar search of the Tibetan Kanjur for “One vehicle” (*theg pa cig*) and found that only thirty-three *sūtras* out of 361 texts, including *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Avataṃsaka*, and 261 Mahāyāna *sūtras*, contained the term. This data points to the fact that the doctrine of “one vehicle,” even though it is an essential concept in East Asian forms of Buddhism from its very beginnings, “required many centuries to gain even a modicum of acceptance in India” (Nattier 2003a:86).³

Ekayāna* in the *Lotus Sūtra* and *Avaiartikacakrasūtra

When we examine a reliable list of the 154 translations that were carried out by Dharmarakṣa and his team of translators over a forty-year period (Boucher 2006), we find that the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Zhengfahua jing* 正法華經, T.263), translated in 285 CE, and the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra* (*Aweiyuezhizhe jing* 阿惟越致遮經, T.266), translated in 284 CE, are among the earliest of his translations to discuss the “single vehicle” (一乘, *ekayāna*). In fact, of the fourteen translations that Dharmarakṣa completed before the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra* is the earliest translation to discuss “single vehicle” (*yisheng*, 一乘).

In order to gain a greater understanding of the notion of the *ekayāna* in self-proclaimed Mahāyāna *sūtras*, I examine the characteristics of this concept found in the *Lotus Sūtra* and compare these to those found in the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra*. A comparison of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Avaiartikacakrasūtra* 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 CE) developments where bodhisattva interest groups, self-referencing their pathway as “the Mahāyāna,” 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

3 I carried out the Tibetan Kanjur search through the E-Kanjur at the The Tibetan & Himalayan Library (<http://www.thlib.org/>) web site. As far as I am currently aware, the earliest extant manuscript occurrence of the term *ekayāna* is preserved in the colophon of the *Śrīmālādeviśiṃhanādanirdeśa* fragments in the Schoyen collection (Matsuda, 2000:74).

developed, yet they both have a number of interrelated concerns and intertextual relations.

The comparison between these two sutras' portrayal of *ekayāna* illustrates underlying similarities in how *ekayāna* was conceived but also clarifies important differences of meaning that broadens scholarly knowledge of the *ekayāna* in Mahāyāna literature. As pointed out by Kunst (1977:313), the concept of the *ekayāna* employed by authorial communities of Mahāyāna *sūtras* not only illustrates how the Mahāyāna is conceived but also provides "...samples of degrees of tolerance towards the acceptance of the validity of other vehicles..." The comparison between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* in the following pages demonstrates that both *sūtras* advocate *ekayāna*, but differ in terms of their depiction of other pathways/vehicles. Additionally, this comparison illustrates how these *sūtras* manage the toleration of other vehicles while ultimately not accepting that other paths/vehicles and their results are real.

Ekayāna in the Lotus Sūtra

A seminal study on the notion of the *ekayāna* in the *Lotus sūtra* was initially published by Kōtatsu Fujita (藤田宏達) in Japanese in 1969 as "Ichijō to sanjō," and then translated in English by Leon Hurvitz as "One Vehicle or Three" (1975). As Fujita points out, an important feature of the *Lotus Sūtra* is its "denial of the commonplace Mahāyāna notion that there are three paths to salvation...(1975:79). The *Lotus Sūtra* famously teaches the doctrine of *ekayāna* through explicit statements and through parables utilizing skillful means (*upāyakauśalya*). The basic position of the *Lotus Sūtra* is clarified in its second chapter on skillful means (*Upāyakauśalyaparivarta*) which forcefully pronounces the doctrine of *ekayāna*. A central citation that illustrates *ekayāna* in the *Lotus sūtra* is found in its second chapter, as follows:

"With a single duty, Śāriputra, with a single task the Tathāgata, Arhat and Perfectly Awakened One appears in the world...Namely, in order to inspire living beings to the mental vision of a tathāgata (*tathāgatajñānadarśana*), 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.”⁴

In this passage the Buddha articulates to Śāriputra that the only purpose of his teaching is to establish living beings on the path to complete Buddhahood, the mental vision of a Tathāgata. The Buddha teaches the Dharma based on only a single vehicle (*ekam yānam*) which is equivalent to the “vehicle of the buddhas” or Buddha-vehicle (*buddhayāna*). Fujita (1975:83–93) examines a number of prose and verse citations to indicate that “Buddha-vehicle” (*buddhayānam*) in the *Lotus Sūtra* is synonymous with a number of expressions such as “Unique Vehicle” (*ekam eva yānam*), “One Vehicle” (*ekayāna*), the “Unique Buddha-vehicle” (*evaikaṃ buddhayānam*), “great vehicle” (*mahāyāna*), “Unique Great Vehicle” (*ekam eva mahāyānam*), and “Bodhisattva-Vehicle” (*bodhi-sattvayāna*).

The *Lotus Sūtra* states that Buddhas, due to the cosmological circumstances of being born in an age characterized by Five Corruptions,⁵ present the Three Vehicles as part of a skillful method to teach beings. The Buddha adapts the teachings of the Dharma to the needs, aspirations, and capacities of sentient beings by indicating Three Vehicles utilizing skillful means. Fujita (1975:84) draws attention to verses of the *Lotus Sūtra* that authenticate its assertion of the One Vehicle’s uniqueness by connecting it to the traditional life story of the Buddha. The *Lotus Sūtra* (KN 54.13ff, verses 2.113ff) depicts the Buddha recalling the skillfulness of former Buddhas in reaching his decision to preach by

4 Translation from Zimmermann 1999:157 based on Sanskrit from KN 39.13–40.15: *ekakṛtyena śāriputraikakaraṇīyena tathāgato 'rhan samyaksambuddho loka utpadyate... yad idaṃ tathāgatajñānadarśanasamādāpanahetunimittam sattvānāṃ tathāgato 'rhan samyaksambuddho loka utpadyate / ...ekam evāhaṃ śāriputra yānam ārabhya sattvānāṃ dharmam deśayāmi yad idaṃ buddhayānam / na kiṃcīc chāriputra dvitīyaṃ vā tṛtīyaṃ vā yānam samvidyate / sarvatraiṣā śāriputra dharmatā daśadigloke /...*

5 The five corruptions (*pañcakaṣāya*) are considered to be signs of the degenerate age of the dharma (*saddharmavipralopa*), a cosmological time period when there are the degenerations of lifespan (*āyuhkaṣāya*), views (*dṛṣṭikaṣāya*), mental afflictions (*kleśakaṣāya*), existence (*sattvakaṣāya*), and of the eon (*kalpakaṣāya*). See Edgerton 1953:102, 174.

“dividing the Buddha’s awakening into three kinds (*buddhabodhiṃ tridhā vibhajya*).” However, the Buddha having seen the “thousands of myriads of millions” of beings who seek the Buddha path, or supreme highest awakening perceives that the time is ripe to “cast aside expedient devices and merely preach the unexcelled path” (Hurvitz 2009:42).

The relationship between skillful means and the single vehicle that is asserted in the second chapter will be restated and explained in the next seven chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra* through parables (*aupamyā*), “background tales” (*pūryayoga*) and predictions of future Buddhahood (*vyākaraṇa*). As Gombrich (1992) has suggested, the *Lotus Sūtra* puns on the double meaning of *yāna* as “path” and “vehicle” to illustrate its inclusive avocation of the bodhisattva way to Buddhahood. The parable of the burning house (Chapter 3) uses the metaphor of vehicle while the parable of the apparitional city (Chapter 7) uses the metaphor of a path. Some parables, such as the wealthy man and his impoverished son (Chapter 4), medicinal herbs (Chapter 5), and the jewel hidden in the robe (Chapter 8) do not utilize either metaphor to illustrate the supremacy of the single way to Buddhahood. Kumārajīva’s version of the *Lotus sūtra* will state both metaphors: “The Buddhas teach the single path, explaining it as three” (T.262,19a; Kubo and Yuyama 2007:94) and “It is only through the power of the Tathāgata’s skillful means that the single buddha vehicle is explained as three” (T.262, 26a; Kubo and Yuyama 2007:132).

Related to this use of *ekayāna*, as a number of scholars have pointed out (Teiser and Stone 2009:16-17), the *Lotus Sūtra* does not provide an explicit definition of the single path/vehicle and never actually explains exactly what the one path/vehicle is. This leads to a number of questions among later Chinese and Japanese commentators concerning “whether the one vehicle or buddha vehicle is the same as, or different from, the bodhisattva vehicle.” Fujita (1975) gives evidence from the *Lotus Sūtra* that either interpretation is possible.

However, as Tamura (1972) and Tsukamoto (1986; 2007:261–263) have pointed out, in the above passage from the second chapter, the Sanskrit uses ordinal numbers in stating “not any second or third vehicle” while the Chinese may be interpreted as using cardinal numbers that state “neither two nor three vehicles.” Some scholars in interpreting the

numbers as ordinals understood the second and third vehicles to refer to *pratyekabuddha* and *śrāvaka* vehicles while the Buddha-vehicle is understood as the first. Other scholars in interpreting the numbers as cardinal understand “two” to refer to the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* vehicles and “three” to refer to the the *śrāvaka*, *pratyekabuddha* and bodhisattva vehicles. Kumārajīva’s disciple Daosheng (道生, ca.355–434 c.e.), in his commentary on the *Lotus Sūtra* interpreted this phrase as “second or third” (Kim 1990:123) while Fayun (法雲, 467–529 c.e.) established the One Vehicle that stood apart from the three vehicles (Kanno 1992; Hayakawa 2007). Followers of Fayun’s interpretation are known as “proponents of the four vehicles.”

Be that as it may, as Fujita (1975:105) notes, the presumption of the Single Vehicle advocated by the *Lotus Sūtra* was to rebuke the view of the Three Vehicles that was held among the different mainstream Buddhist Nikāya lineages, such as the Sarvāstivāda school, at the time of the *Lotus Sūtra*’s composition. How were the three vehicles generally understood at the time of the *Lotus Sūtra* and how are the three vehicles depicted in the *Lotus Sūtra*?

The Three Vehicles in the *Lotus Sūtra*

As I have documented above, and as Fujita has discussed (1975: 92–93), the idea of Three Vehicles was the dominant mainstream Buddhist position before the concept of One Vehicle was formulated. Fujita traced the expression “three vehicles” and its cognates (*trīṇi yānāni*, *triyāna*, *yānatraya*, etc.) to frequent occurrences in a Sarvāstivāda text known as the *Mahāvibhāṣā* as well as the *Mahāvastu* of the Lokottaravāda branch of the Mahāsāṃghikas.

The Three Vehicles are mentioned throughout the *Lotus Sūtra* and a description of their individual characteristics is found in the third chapter, the *Aṣṭamyaṣṭaparivarta*, on the well-known parable of the burning house. In this section of the *Lotus Sūtra* the vehicle of the *śrāvaka* is described in the following passage from the Sanskrit:

“There are some who, wishing to follow the dictates of another’s voice, apply themselves to the teaching of the Tathāgata in order to realize the Nobles’ Four Truths for the purpose of their own *nirvāṇa*. These, desiring

the vehicle of the *śrāvakas*, escape from the three realms...” [KN 80.5–8]

In this passage the *Lotus Sūtra* describes the *śrāvaka* vehicle as consisting of those who hear the Tathāgata’s teaching from another and focus on realizing the Nobles’ Four Truths for the purpose of their own personal *nirvāṇa*. The characterization of a mainstream Buddhist focus upon one’s own personal *nirvāṇa* (*ātmaparinirvāṇa*) is from the perspective of one who is following the bodhisattva ideal. Less polemically, the *Lotus Sūtra* recognizes the ideal of the *śrāvaka* vehicle as centered upon the mainstream Buddhist teaching of the Nobles’ Four Truths. The *Lotus Sūtra* characterizes the vehicle of the *pratyekabuddha* in the same section:

“Other beings, who seek wisdom not dependent on a teacher, as well as self-restraint and calmness, apply themselves to the Tathāgata’s teaching in order to realize causes and conditions for the purpose of their own *nirvāṇa*. These, desiring the *pratyekabuddha* vehicle, escape from the three realms...” [KN 80.8–10]

In this section the *pratyekabuddha* is characterized as seeking wisdom without a teacher and focusing on calmness. However, the *Lotus Sūtra* also makes a connection between the *pratyekabuddha* and the twelve causes and conditions of dependent arising (*pratīyasamutpāda*) which has been thoroughly discussed by Fujita (1975:98–104). The point being that the type of individual in this vehicle, from the perspective of the *Lotus Sūtra*, gains achievement through realizing causes (*hetu*) and conditions (*pratīyaya*).

The above two passages demonstrate that the *Lotus Sūtra* embraces the two vehicles of the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha*, i.e., the position of earlier schools, by acknowledging their pathways on their own level. However, the parables and predictions in the *Lotus Sūtra* illustrate that these pathways were not considered real. What of the vehicle of the bodhisattvas?

The vehicle of the *bodhisattva* is also described in the same section of the *Lotus Sūtra* as follows:

“Again other beings, those who desire the wisdom of the Omniscient

One, the wisdom of a Buddha, the self-generating wisdom, the wisdom acquired without a teacher, for the benefit of many people, for the happiness of many people, apply themselves to the Tathāgata's teaching to understand the knowledge, power, and fearlessness of the Tathāgata, out of compassion, for the sake of aims, benefit, and happiness of the majority of beings, gods and humans, for the sake of complete nirvāṇa of all beings. Of them it is said that, in their desire for the Great Vehicle, they escape from the three realms. That is why they are called "Bodhisattvas, Great Beings." [KN 80.11–81.5]

This passage states that those who desire the Great Vehicle (*mahāyāna*) are bodhisattvas. They are those who desire to attain the state of omniscient full Buddhahood out of compassion for other beings. Such beings desire the knowledge and power of a Tathāgata to lead all beings to complete *nirvāṇa*. Fujita (1975:110f) explains that Great Vehicle, Buddha-vehicle (*buddhayāna*), bodhisattva vehicle, and the *single vehicle*, or single way, are synonyms in the *Lotus Sūtra*. As Fujita (1975:108) states, "This demonstrates that the One Vehicle as such is no different from the Buddha-Vehicle as a member of the triad." An important insight made by Fujita (1975:93) is that the Nikāya schools never present the *buddhayāna*, the first among the three vehicles, in terms of a *bodhisattvayāna*. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, the understanding of the "bodhisattva-vehicle" becomes more universal in scope and signifies that all beings are on the path to Buddhahood rather than the limited view of the few who can be a bodhisattva as presented in earlier discourses. Therefore, the expression "three vehicles" is understood differently between the Nikāya schools and the authorial community of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Ekayāna in the *Lotus sūtra* signifies a critique of three distinct vehicles, with the focus of the critique always being directed against those who are following the vehicles of the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha*, never that of the Buddha. A passage from Dharmarakṣa's *Lotus Sūtra* translation, not found in Kumārajīva (nor cited by Fujita), reads: "[You] should uphold this *True Lotus Sūtra*. The Tathāgata distinguishes skillful means [in a way that] there are not two vehicles (or alternatively, "not

the second vehicle”) and all go on one path.”⁶ Whether we read this extract as criticizing two vehicles or a second vehicle, the passage speaks of the “one path” (一道), echoing the meaning of a single way or path mentioned above. As we will see below in Dharmarakṣa’s translation of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*, the single way is equated with Mahāyāna.

In sum, the *Lotus Sūtra* acknowledges the position of earlier schools on the characteristics of the *śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha* vehicles/paths, but harshly critiques these as unreal through the use of predictions and parables. The *Lotus Sūtra* refers to the Buddha-vehicle, or path, with the additional classifications Great Vehicle, or Bodhisattva Vehicle “One Vehicle” and “Unique Vehicle” expanding the notion of buddha path/vehicle while critiquing the view of three distinct paths or vehicles.

The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* and its Relations with the *Lotus Sūtra*

The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* 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 influenced by the *Perfection of Wisdom* in terms of its teaching on emptiness and irreversible bodhisattvas. The *Lotus Sūtra* influence is apparent with the *Avaivartikacakra*’s emphasis on *ekayāna* and *skill-in-means* (*upāyakauśalya*). This correlation of subject matter between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakra* would lead some Chinese catalogs to list the *sūtras* together within a single section (See Demiéville, *Choix d’études bouddhiques*, 1929–1970, page 192, §2111. IV). The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* was composed at a time when Akṣobhya (Tib. *mi ’khrugs pa*) and Amitābha (Tib. *’od dpag med*) were popular, as visions of both Buddhas are a benefit of the *sūtra* (Chapter 14, *mdo sde zha* 293a4–6). I have demonstrated that there are several common narrative elements shared between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the

6 T.263, 100b12–b13: 當受持此 正法華經 分別如來 善權方便 無有二乘 皆歸一道

Avaiivartikacakrasūtra (Apple 2012). Both *sūtras* have Mañjuśrī and Maitreya as the main opening interlocutors, both place emphasis on skill-in-means (*upāyakaūśalya*) and the allegorical purport of the Buddha's teaching, both utilize the literary motif of bodhisattvas "emerging from the gaps of the earth," and both teach the theory of *ekayāna*.

Ekayāna in the Avaiivartikacakrasūtra

The *Avaiivartikacakrasūtra* teaches *ekayāna* but in a roundabout manner. In the opening chapter of the *Avaiivartikacakrasūtra*, 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 Sound (**Avaiivartikanirghoṣā*, *phyir mi ldog pa'i dbyangs*) where the Tathāgata **Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra* (*'od zer gyis khebs pa'i pad ma rab tu rgyas pa'i sku*) dwells.⁷ This Tathāgata is surrounded by gold complexioned 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 the teachings of other Buddhas. The Tathāgata responds that this teaching is harmonious and

7 I have reconstructed the name of the **Avaiivartikanirghoṣā* world-system based on the world-system *Avaiivartikacakranirghoṣa* found in the Sanskrit manuscript of the *Anantabuddhakṣetraruṇodbhāvana-nāmamahāyānasūtra* (Vinitā 2010:571). This reading matches with Dharmarakṣa's "irreversible sound 不退轉音" (T.266, 198c8–9). The reading also matches with the Tibetan, *phyir mi ldog pa'i dbyangs*, found in all manuscripts among Western Kanjurs (e.g. Basgo, Hemis) and the Them-spangs-ma line (e.g. Tokyo, Ulan Bator). However, manuscripts among the Tshal-pa manuscript line, such as 'Jang sa tham /Lithang, Kangxi (257a3), Peking (257a5), Qing Kangxi (257a5), and Derge (242a6) read *phyir mi ldog pa'i dbyings*, "irreversible sphere." I have reconstructed the name of the Tathāgata **Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra* based on the Tibetan in consultation with Handurukande (1973) and the name *Suniścītapadmaphullitagātra* given in the Sanskrit (Vinitā, *ibid*).

that all Buddhas teach the *avaivartikadharmacakra* (*phyir mi ldog pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo*) that leads beings to the one path/vehicle through utilizing skill-in-means after initially indicating three paths/vehicles. The *Avaiivartikacakrasūtra* 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?” 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 particles 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 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?”⁸

In the version translated from Tibetan given above, the bodhisattva asks about “three vehicles” (*theg pa gsum*) while in Dharmarakṣa’s version, he inquires about “three paths” (三道, T.266, 199a3). Along these lines, the third path/vehicle in the Tibetan is “Mahāyāna” (*theg pa chen po*), while in Dharmarakṣa’s version the third is given as “spreading the Buddha’s path” (弘佛道). Based on Fujita’s work (1975:83–93) articulated above, this is most likely a reference to *buddhayāna*. Here we see the same equivalences between path/vehicle and Mahāyāna/Buddhayāna as are found in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The above citation of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* portrays the bodhisattvas in the “Irreversible sound” (*Avaivartikanirghoṣa*) 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 explicitly advocate *ekayāna* at this point, the statement which follows implicitly indicates that the *sūtra* is promoting the single path/vehicle.

[The Bhagavan [*Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra] replied] “Son of Good Family, sentient beings aspire for the inferior and when they do not enter the single path/vehicle, [the Buddhas] guide them with skill-in-means. Son of Good Family, the Buddhas, the Blessed Ones, have great skill-in-means. [The bodhisattva] stated, “Bhagavān, will those [sentient beings] not aspire for the single vehicle at the time of the five corruptions? Bhagavān, the teaching of dharma is considered to be very difficult.” [The Bhagavān replied,] “Son of Good Family, it is so.”⁹

This scene in the opening chapter of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* utilizes a narrative technique which I refer to as “displacement,” a technique that entails introducing the audience to problems and issues to be

8 *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*, translated from Tibetan Derge 242b2–243a5, close correspondence with Dharmarakṣa (T.266, 198c27–199a8).

9 *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*, translated from Tibetan Derge 243a5–243a6; close correspondence with Dharmarakṣa (T. 266, 9.198c27–199a8).

negotiated by Buddhists in this world through the narrative displaced context of another world-system. This opening setting has Śāriputra and Mañjuśrī traveling to another world-system called “Irreversible Sound” (*Avaivartikanirghoṣa*), to ostensibly learn from a Buddha in that realm that the single path/vehicle is taught throughout the universe but three vehicles are only taught in this *Sahā* world-realm due to the inferior aspirations of beings and their poor cosmological circumstances.

The next scene in the *sūtra* shifts back to Jeta Grove in Śrāvastī, where Ānanda recognizes through a number of auspicious signs that the Buddha is about to give an important teaching. Just as the Buddha arises from his concentration, Mañjuśrī emerges out of the gaps of the earth travelling from the Irreversible Sound world-system with thousands of bodhisattvas. The Buddha then commands Ānanda to summon all the members of the *saṃgha* in Jeta Grove to hear the anticipated Dharma teaching. After Ānanda returns from summoning members of the *saṃgha*, the Buddha requests Mahāmaudgalyāyana to go out and summon, in the Tibetan version, as many bodhisattvas-mahāsattvas as possible throughout the three-thousand-fold universe. Dharmarakṣa’s version has the same scenario, but qualifies the bodhisattvas as “all who have served previous Buddhas, whose aspiration is to the great vehicle and who learn to stay on the single path...” (T.266, 201a17–18; 皆以奉敬過去諸佛。志於大乘學住一道). This section of the *sūtra* implies that bodhisattvas reside on the single path to Buddhahood while aspiring for the great vehicle. The *sūtra* plays on the two metaphors of path and vehicle to convey the notion that one way is travelled by all to the destination of Buddhahood. Does this include *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*? If so, how does this *sūtra* depict their pathways?

The Three Vehicles in the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*

The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*, unlike the *Lotus Sūtra*, does not describe the qualities and pathways of *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* on their own level and then reveal through parables and predictions that those levels are illusionary. Rather, the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* rewrites and transforms the pathways and qualities of various types of *śrāvaka* spiritual attainments, including the *pratyekabuddha*, as actually being bodhisattvas through the rhetorical technique of semantic elucidation (skt. *nirukta*)

(Apple 2009). In other words, the *sūtra* presumes that all the various types of Noble Beings (*ārya*), as well as those who aspire for such status, are bodhisattvas from the onset but do not realize it due to degenerate circumstances. The *sūtra* explains that the Buddha employs skill-in-means in his use of allegorical speech (Tib. *ldem po ngag*, Skt. *saṃdhābhāṣya*) for beings who do not initially aspire for the state of Buddhahood at the time of the five corruptions.

In Chapters Two through Chapter Ten of this *sūtra*, the Buddha articulates to Ānanda how mainstream Buddhist *śrāvaka* stages of attainment are actually irreversible bodhisattvas. The Buddha re-describes the following *śrāvaka* stages of attainment, which are found in the earliest extant discourses attributed to the Buddha, as bodhisattvas: Followers-through-Faith (*śraddhānusārin*), Followers-of-Dharma (*dharmānusārin*), the Eighth (*aṣṭamaka*), Stream-enterer (*śrota-āpanna*), Once-returner (*sakṛdāgāmin*), Non-returner (*anāgāmin*), Arhat, and Pratyekabuddha. These categories of spiritual attainment are found in all the Nikāya schools of mainstream Buddhism (Bareau 2013).

In the *sūtra*, the Buddha gives a whole prose discourse followed by a number of stanzas on a certain type of bodhisattva who has a status name derived from *śrāvaka* terminology. 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 to illustrate bodhisattvas. The bodhisattvas are described with word-plays, or puns, that elucidate the qualities of the bodhisattva based on the *śrāvaka* terminology. A Follower-of-Dharma is described as a bodhisattva who “follows the stream of inconceivable dharmas” (Taipei 240, fol. 502, *acintya-dharma-śrota-anusāri*) and is irreversibly bound to attain the omniscient knowledge of a Buddha (*buddha-jñāna*) or “the great knowledge” (*mahājñāna*). The *sūtra* redefines the term “Follower-of-Dharma” and connects it with being an irreversible bodhisattva by means of semantic elucidation (*nirvacana*) or word-plays on the term dharma. Along these lines, the Eighth (*aṣṭamaka*) is re-described as a bodhisattva-mahāsattva through word plays on categories related to “eight” (*aṣṭa*). The bodhisattva enters into the Buddha-vehicle while passing beyond the eight perversions, contacting the eight liberations, not having attachment to the eight-fold path. A Non-returner

(*anāgāmin*) is redefined with word-plays on movement (Skt. *gamyate*) as there is no coming (*anāgama*) nor going (*anirgama*) in terms of ultimate reality (Cf. Lamotte 1976:117; Braarvig 1993: xliii). This chapter also indicates that “All sentient beings have the opportunity for the buddha vehicle,” universalizing the bodhisattva path for all beings. The *sūtra* also describes an Arhat with a semantic elucidation playing on the twofold etymology of arhat as “one who is worthy” (from the root *arh* “to be worthy”) and “one who has destroyed (*hata*) the foe (*ari*).” For example, the *sūtra* states “the bodhisattva, the mahāsattva is one who destroys activities of limited religious practice and is one who is worthy to achieve the activity of liberating all sentient beings.” The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* is the earliest Indian Buddhist source I am aware of to employ this twofold etymology with reference to Arhats. The *sūtra* will redefine *pratyekabuddha* based on etymological word-plays of *pratyakṣa*, “direct perception.” As illustrated above in the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *pratyekabuddha* is usually thought to be construed from glosses related with *pratyaya* “conditions” (Fujita 1975: 99–101, 128n88; Dejong 1977). Echoing the *Lotus Sūtra* (KN 4.53; Kubo and Yuyama 2007:93), the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* states that a *śrāvaka* is one “who proclaims unelaborated, pacified, awakening” of Buddhahood to immeasurable sentient beings (Taipai 240, fol. 531.3.). Both these *sūtras* pun the word *śrāvaka*, a *vrddhi* derivative of the root *śru-* (“to hear”) to which the suffix *-ka* has been appended, to mean two things at the same time. The primary meaning is of “one who hears” found within mainstream Buddhist formations, including Indic heterodox traditions such as Jainism, and the second meaning, the rhetorical understanding that these Mahāyāna *sūtras* wish to advocate, is “one who enables others to hear.” The idea being that real *śrāvakas* in these Mahāyāna *sūtras* are those who proclaim the universal path to Buddhahood to all beings.

In this way, the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* rhetorically transvalues the stages of *śrāvaka* spiritual attainment, as well as the attainment of *pratyekabuddha*, found in early mainstream Buddhist discourses into bodhisattvas. The authorial community of this *sūtra* hollowed out and redefined the traditional terms of status found within mainstream hierarchical Buddhist path structures to reconceive the bodhisattva way. In brief, these status terms were transvalued to embody bodhisattva

qualities that were redirected toward entering the Buddha-vehicle (*buddhayāna*) and following the Buddha-path to attain *buddha-dharmas* and *buddha-jñāna*. The *sūtra* makes clear that the Buddha-vehicle is the way of bodhisattvas for all the types of Noble beings discussed throughout the discourse who are considered to be bodhisattvas. Along these lines, the *sūtra* also considers even great arhats, such as Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, Subhūti, Aniruddha, Revata, and Kapina to be bodhisattvas.¹⁰ The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* employs a subtle rhetoric of bodhisattva universalism to its audience through the use of semantic elucidation and the hermeneutics of allegorical speech to convey the notion that all spiritual attainments in Buddhism are directed toward the destination of Buddhahood.

Conclusion

The *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* represent a second layer of early to middle period developments among bodhisattva interest groups who were still addressing how bodhisattvas become Buddhas and outlining the bodhisattva path against traditional mainstream forms of Buddhism. At the time of the formation of these *sūtras*, a three path or vehicle paradigm consisting of Buddhas, *pratyekabuddhas*, and *arhats/śrāvakas* was the dominant model accepted and followed by the majority of mainstream Buddhists within the Nikāya ordination lineages. Advocates of the bodhisattva way began to popularize the path to Buddhahood as not only more exalted but also more accessible to Buddhist followers. This depiction of the bodhisattva way (*bodhisattvayāna*) differed from the Nikāya schools who had upheld a more exclusive way to Buddhahood (*buddhayāna*). The rhetorical use of the concept of *ekayāna*, a term expressing a single path or vehicle, was one of numerous techniques, including skillful means, allegorical meaning, and semantic elucidation that the second layer of bodhisattva *sūtras* utilized to enable the bodhisattva path to become more popular.

In its earliest extant use, the idea of *ekayāna* was utilized in an inclusive manner to unify bodhisattva groups as being on the “same” path (*samayāna*). *Ekayāna* then became a technique of incorporating the

10 *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*, Tibetan, Derge, 273a3–273b7.

conservative mainstream vehicle of the *śrāvaka* path to be included within the “Greater” Vehicle (*mahāyāna*) while expanding the definition and presence of the bodhisattva path to be universalist in scope. *Sūtras* composed at the time of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* began to redefine and expand the status of the bodhisattva and the bodhisattva path to be all inclusive of every conceivable status category within the mainstream Buddhist worldview. For the authors of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*, this included status categories and terms like Stream-enterer, Once-returned, and even Tathāgata and Bhagavan, who were redefined as bodhisattvas (Apple, *forthcoming*). The use of the *ekayāna* theory along with semantic elucidation by the authorial community of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* was mostly inclusive in nature as this discourse does not contain the exclusionary, as well as derogatory, term *hīnayāna* “the inferior vehicle” in referring to those who do not follow the bodhisattva way. On the other hand, while the *Lotus Sūtra* utilizes predictions and parables to demonstrate the power of its teaching to grant future Buddhahood to its followers, it appears to be one of the first *sūtras* to use the term *hīnayāna* “inferior vehicle,” which occurs eight times in the early strata of Kumārajīva’s version (Saigusa 1981:125). Even though the *Lotus Sūtra* recognizes the pathways of *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas* on their own level, it is forceful in its negation of those pathways as genuine.

Both the *Lotus sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* teach the single vehicle and advocate that all beings are destined for 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, the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* redefines and transforms these categories to indicate bodhisattvas who are progressing towards the state of Buddhahood. The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* 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 her faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*. In brief, the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* both discuss the single vehicle but differ in terms

of their depiction of, and toleration for, other pathways/vehicles while ultimately not accepting that other paths/vehicles and their results are real in their teaching of universal Buddhahood.

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The Single Vehicle (*ekayāna*)
in the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* and *Lotus Sūtra*.

James B. Apple

The concept of the “single vehicle” (Skt. *ekayāna*, 一乘, Ch. *yisheng*, Jpn. *ichijō*) is found in various Buddhist discourses that are classified as Mahāyāna *sūtras*, such as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanādanirdeśa*, and *Laṅkāvatāra*. This paper examines the characteristics of *ekayāna* found in the in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, also known as the *Lotus Sūtra*, and compares these to the characteristics found in the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* to gain a greater understanding of the notion of *ekayāna* in self-proclaimed Mahāyāna *sūtras* that become more prominent from the second century CE onwards.