

創価大学
国際仏教学高等研究所
年報

平成30年度
(第22号)

Annual Report
of
The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism
at Soka University

for the Academic Year 2018

Volume XXII

創価大学・国際仏教学高等研究所
東京・2019・八王子

The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism
Soka University
Tokyo・2019

The *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism at Soka University* (ARIRIAB), published annually since 1997, contains papers on a wide range of Buddhist studies, from philological research on Buddhist texts and manuscripts in various languages to studies on Buddhist art and archaeological finds. Also, by publishing and introducing newly-discovered manuscripts and artefacts, we aim to make them available to a wider public so as to foster further research.

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*Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology
(ARIRIAB)*

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Vol. XXII (2019)

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Ed. by Seishi KARASHIMA and Tatsushi TAMAI.

The *Mahāvastu*. A New Edition. Vol. III

Ed. by Katarzyna MARCINIAK. *BIBLIOTHECA PHILOLOGICA ET PHILOSOPHICA BUDDHICA* vol. XIV, 1.

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2019年3月31日発行

編集主幹 辛嶋静志・工藤順之

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Published on 31 March 2019

Editors-in-Chief: Seishi KARASHIMA and Noriyuki KUDO

Published by The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University

1-236 Tangi, Hachioji, Tokyo 192-8577, JAPAN

Phone: +81-42-691-2695 / Fax: +81-42-691-4814; E-mail: iriab@soka.ac.jp; URL: <http://iriab.soka.ac.jp/>

Printed by Simizukobo, Co.Ltd., Hachioji, Tokyo, JAPAN

The Semantic Elucidation (*nirukta*) of Bodhisattva Spiritual Attainment: A Rhetorical Technique in Early Mahāyāna Sūtras*

James B. APPLE

Abstract

This paper argues that semantic elucidation (*nirukta*) served as a powerful rhetorical technique for authorial communities in the propagation of Mahāyāna texts to transform mainstream Buddhist states of attainment—such as the Stream-enterer (*srota-āpanna*), Non-returner (*anāgāmin*), and Arhant—into spiritual levels embodied by bodhisattvas. The paper argues that this transformation of mainstream Buddhist levels of attainment occurred in early Mahāyāna formations before the structure of the bodhisattva ten stages (*daśabhūmi*) was established. The paper demonstrates, through drawing upon examples from *sūtras* such as the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi*, *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, and *Avaivartikacakra*, that the ‘method of *nairukta*’ (*nairukta-vidhānena*), through processes of transvaluation and substitution, hollowed out mainstream Buddhist understandings of spiritual attainment and reformulated them in terms of the bodhisattva way found among nascent Mahāyāna communities.

Keywords

Nirukta, etymology, rhetoric, skilful means, *pratibhāna* (eloquence), bodhisattva attainment.

Introduction

In this paper I argue that *nirvacana* or *nirukta* (‘semantic elucidation’) functions to let the emergent ideals of Mahāyāna discourses to become acceptable and more popular in its nascent phases to mainstream Buddhist audiences. Authorial communities of Mahāyāna discourses imply that their teachings contain the “original” hidden intention of the Buddha. The Buddha, in their representation, utilized skillinmeans (*upāya-kausalya*) through his use of allusive speech (Tib. *ldem po ngag* ≈ Skt. *saṃdhābhāṣya*) to lead beings to Buddhahood according to their capacities. As I demonstrate below in several select examples, Mahāyāna discourses unpack the definitive meaning of the Buddha’s speech by means of the ‘method of semantic elucidation’ (*nairukta-vidhānena*). Through such processes of elucidation, authorial communities, preachers of Mahāyāna or *dharmabhāṅakas*, alter the meaning of key Buddhist terms and invert the significance of mainstream Buddhist terms toward visions of the *bodhisattva* way fermented in Mahāyāna *sūtras*.

In order to further understand the context for the employment of semantic elucidation in transforming spiritual attainment found among select Mahāyāna *sūtras*, I initially outline *nirukta* or *nirvacana* in classical India, including Brahmanical and mainstream Buddhist sources, followed by an overview of semantic elucidation in Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. I

* I acknowledge the anonymous reviewer whose comments significantly improved the paper. Any errors are mine alone.

then discuss the rhetorical nature of semantic elucidation in Mahāyāna discourses and demonstrate how this technique was utilized by Mahāyāna authorial communities to trans-value mainstream Buddhist categories of spiritual attainment into classifications applicable to *bodhisattvas*.

Semantic Elucidation in Vedic and Brahmanical India¹

Semantic elucidation in classical India, *nirukta* or *nirvacana*, is commonly translated as “etymology,” and is found throughout ancient Indian literature.² For a modern reader’s eyes, the classical Indian usage of *nirukta* does not seem to be interested in the history of words or in linguistic development, rather, the primary interest lies in semantic content. The technical terms employed are derived from the Sanskrit verb *nir-vac*, and its past participle *nir-ukta*, meaning “to express” or “to explain” the underlying sense of a concept. *Nirukta* follows the name of the first systematic representative of this tradition, Yāska, who composed a commentary on the *Nighantu*, a catalog list of words of the *ṛgveda*.³ As Louis Renou has stated regarding this work, “it condenses the symbolic and mystical reflection on language; its import is to create verbal associations” (1985: §610). *Nirukta* in ancient Indian literature may be found in both ritual and philosophical applications, where it serves as a cosmological and theological ordering strategy (Patton 1996:140-2). Vedic *nirukta* (‘explication’) merges etymologizing with ritual through the analysis of mantra focusing on the mystic and religious quality of etymology, while *mīmamsā* (‘reflection’) couples etymology and allegory to search for philosophical truths (Del Bello 2007: 43). Johannes Bronkhorst (2001:147-148) explains the difference between the semantic content of etymology as opposed to linguistic or historical etymology as follows:

A semantic etymology is to be distinguished from a historical etymology. A historical etymology presents the origin or early history of a word; it tells us, for example, that a word in a modern language is derived from another word belonging to an earlier language, or to an earlier stage of the same language...Semantic etymologies...connect one with one or more others which are believed to elucidate its meaning. The god Rudra, for example, has that name according to the Vedic text called *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (6.1.3.10), because he cried (*rud-*) in one story that is told about him. Semantic etymologies tell us nothing about the history of a word, but something about its meaning.

Nirukta is traditionally held to be a ‘limb of the Veda’ (*vedāṅga*), an auxiliary branch of literature needed to help understand the Veda (Bronkhorst 2001:152). In Brahmanical terms, *nirukta* tries to bring value and order to the semantic etymologizing that is prevalent in the Vedic Brāhmaṇas. Although, as Yelle (2011:130) notes, “the broader phenomenon of reliance

¹ This section draws from Apple (2009). Specialized studies on ancient Indian etymology are found in Deeg (1995), Kahrs (1998), and Visigalli (2017a). An overview of modern scholarly interpretations of *nirukta* is discussed in Visigalli (2017b, 1146-7; 2018, 985-988).

² As noted by Visigalli (2017a, 1, note 2), Yāska (see following note) refers to both *nirukta* and *nirvacana* and the terms have been translated with ‘etymologizing,’ ‘etymology/ies’ (Visigalli 2017a), ‘semantic analysis’ (Kahrs 1998), and ‘semantic etymologizing’ (Bronkhorst 2001) among others. I also translate the terms with ‘pun’, ‘word-play’ and ‘semantic elucidation’ to reflect the polysemic nature of the terms.

³ Yāska is previous to the 5th century before the common era before the grammarian Pāṇini. See *The Nirukta of Yāska: with Nighantu edited with Durga’s commentary* by H.M. Bhadkamkar. Poona, India: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1985.

on coincidental phonetic analogies to disclose the true meaning of a word has been called “fictitious etymologizing.” Gombrich (1992) has clarified that such “etymologies are not botched attempts at history or linguistics by people who did not know any better...” but rather, “attempts to discover some internal significance in the Sanskrit language which they conveyed of as a blueprint for reality.” Etymologies in Vedic based traditions are therefore thought to convey knowledge that is deemed important and advantageous. Along with special knowledge, *nirukta* has a close connection with myths. The etymological ‘explanation’ of *nirukta* employed in Brahmanical use constantly makes reference to myths within Vedic lore. Etymologies, in addition to revealing special knowledge connected to myth, are also thought to reveal hidden layers of linguistic reality, bringing out the concealed significance of language (Bronkhorst 2001:153). As Yelle (2011:131) emphasizes, such etymologies were “culturally successful attempts to argue poetically for relationships that extended deeper than the verbal level...”

In its employment of *nirukta*, Brahmanical language presumes and stipulates the non-arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign—a correspondence theory of language (Bronkhorst 2011). For Brahmanical groups there must be a necessary and natural connection between a word and signification. *Nirukta* seeks out a relation between the thing and the name that it is given, the presumption being that the connection brings out the function, activity, and character of the name. The question is of knowing why x is called x. *Niruktas* in South Asian texts therefore often employ the interrogative adverb *kasmāt* “why...” to introduce an etymology of the correlative pronouns *yasmād...tasmād yena...tena*, “because this...that is why” (Balbir 1991:121-122; Kahrs 1983).

Heterodox Indic traditions such as the followers of Gautama Buddha do not uphold such a correspondence theory of language. For the Buddha, words were not eternal but were conventional, arbitrary, and did not have an essential connection to meaning (Levman 2012:40-41). *Nirukta* rather than a technique of registering correspondence becomes, for the Buddha and his followers, a technique of rhetoric in which established meanings of key signifiers are hollowed out and re-defined. In general, pan-Indic terms such as *dharma*, *karma*, *saṃsāra* are accepted by all traditions but the defined significance that is generated is specific to each particular tradition. In the discourses of Indian heterodox traditions such as Buddhism, etymologico-grammatical analysis generates a number of recurrent concepts—the conquering over the passions, the principles of cause and effect or karma, asceticism, and detachment. In this instance, as Nalini Balbir has noted (1991:131), it is not exaggerated to say that *nirukta* functions as an instrument of propaganda for the basic values of Buddhist ideologies.

In early Buddhist usage, the instruments of etymology were employed against Brahmanical orthodoxy and the terms that were transvalued usually held some social significance or status in the competing communities of Brāhmaṇas, Jainas, and Buddhists. Status marking classifications or registers of reverence such as “Arhant,” “Bhagavant” were shaped by *nirukta* according to the ideals of the community. A good example is found in the *Dhammapada* (verse 388) where the proper meaning of the term ‘*brāhmaṇa*’, a term for ritual specialists who gain such standing through hereditary birth status, becomes in the eyes of the Buddhist *bāhitapāpo ti brāhmaṇo*, a *brāhmaṇa* is “one who has banished wrong.”⁴

⁴ *Dhammapada* (edited by Hinüber and Norman, 1995, 109), Brāhmaṇavagga (26) 388: *bāhitapāpo ti*

Along these lines, in other early discourses preserved in Pali the Buddha himself is represented as transvaluing status terms through the connection of alliteration or assonance utilizing the instruments of etymology. So for example, at *Sutta-nipāta* verse 518 the Buddha is asked by the wanderer Sabhiya for what reason are the epithets *brāhmaṇa*, *samaṇa* (“renunciate”), *nhātaka* (literally: “washed-clean”; a term for high ritual status), and *nāga* applied. The Buddha replies in verses 519-22 with four etymologies that play upon the terms, hollowing out and transvaluing the terms so that they may metaphorically be applied to the ethical and moral qualities of an awakened person who follows the Buddha’s teaching (Norman 1980). In the *Aggañña Sutta* (DN 27.22), the “Discourse on What is Primary” (Collins 1993), the Buddha gives a lengthy satire on Brahmanical cosmogony and provides a series of puns playing upon eight words on the origins of the four Brahmanical classes (sections 21-26). According to Collins (1993:316) these “word-derivations are offered...in such a way as to add to the tone of ironic and polemical wit.” Indeed, in the *sutta* (section 23.2, Collins 1993:374) the Buddha remarks that “ ‘They do not meditate (*na...jjhāyanti*) [is what] Students [of the Veda] (*ajjhāyakā*) [means]”, a pun on *ajjhāyaka* that makes a polemic point through wit and humor.

Just as the Buddha and his early followers transvalued status terms of religious significance among Indic traditions, similar processes of status term transvaluation were carried out between Buddhist authorial communities. Specifically, the following sections illustrate select instances of the transvaluation of mainstream Buddhist terms by Mahāyāna authorial communities. The transvaluation of key mainstream Buddhist classifications of spiritual attainment through etymological instruments by Mahāyāna authorial communities replicates the use of etymology in discourses that took place between Brahmanical and heterodox communities. Before discussing the rhetorical nature, and employment, of semantic elucidation in several select Mahāyāna *sūtras*, the following section outlines the place of *nirukta* or *nirvacana* in the normative understanding of mainstream Buddhist and Mahāyāna Buddhist sources.

Semantic Elucidation in Mainstream and Mahāyāna Buddhist literature

For Buddhist authorial communities *nirukta* is a special type of knowledge known as *niruktipratīsamvid*, the “analytical knowledge of semantic elucidation.” *Niruktipratīsamvid* occurs in both mainstream Buddhist and Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. *Nirukti* is consistently listed with three other *pratisamvid* or ‘analytical knowledges’-*artha* (‘objects’ or ‘things’), *dharma* (‘Buddhist teaching’), and *pratibhāna* (‘eloquence’). As a set, these four occur together in the Nikāyas and Āgamas, the Abhidharma and Śāstra literature, and in Mahāyāna *sūtras* and śāstras.⁵

Mahāyāna teaching digests such as the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* and the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* ascribe *niruktipratīsamvid* to the bodhisattva and this is also a prescribed virtue of

brāhmaṇo samacariyā samaṇo ti vuccati. pabbājayaṃ attano malaṃ tasmā pabbajito ti vuccati. As “one who has banished wrong” is one a *brāhmaṇa*; Because of “living in calm” is one called a *samaṇa*. Dispelling one’s own stain —Therefore is one called “gone forth.” For a complete philological analysis of this verse and its occurrences see Karashima (2016). As Karashima (2016, 104) demonstrates, “This Buddhist folk-etymology, associating *brāhmaṇa* with the verb *bāh-*, is only possible in a dialect where OIA *brāhmaṇa* became the vernacular form **bāhaṇa*...”.

⁵ See Lamotte, *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nāgārjuna*, vol III, pp 1614 ff for a brief list of traditional sources for the *pratisamvids* or ‘analytical knowledges’ as well as Pagel 1995:272-280.

bodhisattvas in several Mahāyāna sūtras like the *Akṣayamatīnirdeśasūtra* and *Daśabhūmikasūtra*. The term often qualifies bodhisattvas in the opening *nidānas* of sūtras, is a name of a *samādhi* in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, serves as a quality of *dharmabhāṇakas* in the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, and is a special instruction which Vimalakīrti gives to Maudgalyāyana.⁶

As Ulrich Pagel (1995: 273n780) notes, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* and the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* mention that the primary aim of the analytical knowledges is for the training of a bodhisattva to become a teacher and reciter of the doctrine (*dharmabhāṇaka*). While the general nature of the various types of *pratisamvid* is described in the texts, their exact scope and practical application is not clearly demonstrated. Several passages in the *nikāyas* indicate that in early Buddhism, the *pratisamvids* were not considered to be advanced practices of the path. The *pratisamvids* are listed in the practices of ‘ordinary’ monks (*Aṅguttaranikāya* I, p. 24, *Aṅguttaranikāya* II, p. 161) and Śāriputra was able to attain them only a few months after his ordination (*Aṅguttaranikāya* II, p. 160). The four *pratisamvid* in mainstream forms of Buddhism are considered to be naturally indivisible and achieved at the same time. The *Abhidharmakośa* (7.37cd–40) ranks them into two categories. The *nirukti*, as well as the *dharmaprasamvid*, relate to conventional knowledge (*saṃvṛtijñāna*) and operate only within the ‘desire realm’ (*kāmadhātu*) and the meditative concentrations (*dhyānas*), with the *nirukti pratisamvid* being restricted to the first level of concentration (*dhyāna*).⁷

According to Pagel (1995:273, note 780), for a *śrāvaka*, *nirukti*pratisamvid has as its object forms of conventional speech, or the expressions of language relative to the thing designated and the designation (*attadhammaniruttābhilāpa*). *Nirukti* for a *śrāvaka* focuses on the correct discrimination of the philological knowledge of grammatical forms and its linguistic expression in vernacular language.⁸ In Mahāyāna texts on the subject, for the bodhisattva, knowledge of *nirukti* is not only ability in philological analysis but also the ability to gain fluency in multiple languages including human and non-human forms of speech.⁹ As Skilling (2010:9) explains, “for a bodhisattva, *nirukti*pratisamvid...is the ability to explain the Dharma in every conceivable language.” As Braarvig has noted (1985:17) rhetoric grew as a significant discipline within Mahāyāna formations with principle parts including memory (*dhāraṇī*), eloquence (*pratibhāna*), and for our purposes here—semantic elucidation—*nirukti* or *nirvacana*. Although a great number of Mahāyāna sūtras and śāstras contain normative descriptions of *nirukti*pratisamvid as knowledge that bodhisattvas acquire as well as qualities they embody, ostensibly it seems that sūtras do not explicitly provide examples of a bodhisattva’s semantic elucidation. However, in light of the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*’s description of *nirukti* as semantic elucidation (*nirvacana*),¹⁰ I think that it is feasible

⁶ Thurman, 1976:25-26; Lamotte, 1976:49; section 8, p.84: *dharmaniruktividhijñena= chos kyi nge pa’i tshig rnam par shes pas...*

⁷ AK, 7.37-740: *tathaiva prañidhijñānaṃ sarvālambaṃ tu tat tathā / dharmārthayorniruktau ca pratibhāne ca samvidah // 7.37 // tisro nāmāthavāgijñānamavivartyaṃ yathākramam / caturthīyuktamuktābhilāpamārga-vaśītvayoh // 7.38 // vānmārgālabanā cāsau nava jñānāni sarvabhūḥ / daśa ṣaḍvārthasamvit sā sarvatra anye tu sāmṛtam // 7.39 // kāmadhyāneṣu dharme vit vāci prathamakāmayaoh /vikalābhirna tallābhī ṣaḍete prāntakoṭikāḥ // 7.40 // de La Vallée Poussin 1925, volume 5, pp. 89-94.*

⁸ Pagel citing *Vibhaṅga*, pp. 295-9 as well as the *Prajñaptipādaśāstra* cited in *Abhidharmakośa*, at chapter vii, verse 40b.

⁹ See Braarvig 1993, volume I, pp. 112-113; AS (Rahula, pp. 226-227, 234).

¹⁰ *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Dutt 1966, 176.11): *yatpunaḥ sarvadharmānāmeva sarvanirvacaneṣu yāvadbhāvikatayā yathāvadbhāvikatayā ca bhāvanāmayamasaktamavivartyaṃ jñānam / iyameṣāṃ niruktipratisamvit /* “Furthermore, that which is unhindered, unshakable knowledge produced by meditative cultivation, with regard to every

to point toward examples of semantic elucidation in Mahāyāna sūtras that are ostensibly present in the form of what is commonly called puns or “word-play.” *Nirvacana* as “word-play” occurs in a number of Mahāyāna sūtras as the emphasis or manipulation of sounds to provide the opportunity for transformed meaning. Such word-play is dependent on its context of occurrence in a sūtra as well as its phonic effect as a performative utterance in recitation. Occurrences may have a variety of functions: explanatory, emphatic, descriptive, and so forth that cannot be fully explored in this paper.

The Rhetorical Nature of *nirukti/nirvacana* in Mahāyāna sūtras

Nirvacana as rhetoric serves to elide the meaning of principle signifiers of mainstream Buddhism and persuade its audience that the elucidated meaning authenticates the understanding of a given sūtra’s bodhisattva vision of a particular term. A case in point would be the appearance of *nirukta* or *nirvacana* in the prose portions of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. In his translation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* Conze refers to these occurrences as “definitions” where such terms as bodhisattva (i 18), great being (*mahāsattva*) (i 18), world (*loka*) (xii 256), unthinkable (*acintya*) (viii 193; xiii 277), immeasurable (i 23; xviii 346), incalculable (xviii 346), and *tathāgata* (xii 272, 274) are explained through *nirvacana*. For example, the Buddha is called a ‘Tathāgata’ because he has awakened to *tathatā* or ‘suchness’:

“In this way, Subhūti, the Tathāgata, after he has awakened to suchness, knows the suchness of the world, knows its non-mistaken suchness, knows its unaltered suchness. In this way, Subhūti, because the Tathāgata has awakened to suchness, he is called a ‘Tathāgata’ (*evaṃ hi subhūte tathāgatas tathatām abhisambudhya lokasya tathatām jānāty avitathatām jānāty ananyatathatām jānāti* / / *evaṃ ca subhūte tathāgatas tathatām abhisambuddhah samstathāgata ityucyate* //; Mitra 1888, 272.5-8).

Another early bodhisattva sūtra, *The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugrapariṣṭhā)*, published in a study and translation by Jan Nattier (2003), also provides several examples of *nirvacana* in the form of play on words.¹¹ In the first part of the sūtra, when the lay bodhisattva enters a monastery (AY *miao*, Tib. *gtsug lag khang*=Skt. *vihāra*), after cultivating a proper attitude of reverence the bodhisattva should reflect as follows:

“This is a place for dwelling in emptiness (Tib. *stong-pa-nyid-la gnas-pa’i gnas*, Skt. *śūnyatā-vihārāvāsa*). This is place for dwelling in the signless (**animitta-vihārāvāsa*). This is a place for dwelling in the wishless (**apraṇihita-vihārāvāsa*). It is a place for dwelling in loving-kindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇa*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekṣa*). (§18A) (Nattier 2003: 92, 264-265)

The word play is here is on *vihāra*. Nattier is able to identify the Indic ‘word-play’ underlying the Chinese and Tibetan translations through a process that she calls ‘triangulation,’ whereby a comparison of the languages of translation allows for a hypothesis of the Indic based source language. In this occurrence, the *nirvacana* of *vihāra* allows for an extension of the common Buddhist ideal of *vihāra* or dwelling place to include bodhisattva

single semantic elucidation (*sarvanirvacana*) of all dharmas covering the entire reality and in conformity with reality, that is their [i.e., the bodhisattvas’] analytical knowledge of semantic elucidation.

¹¹ See Nattier 2003: pp. 92n28, 255n311, 257n319, 264n353, 271n412, 303n641.

ideals of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), signlessness (*animitta*), and wishlessness (*apañihita*).

The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra* also provides examples of *nirvacana* as a means of rhetoric. A case in point is found in the fourth chapter, *adhimukti-parivartaḥ* (KN, 100-120), where Subhūti, Mahākātyāyana, and Mahākāśyapa among other great disciples express amazement upon hearing the Buddha's announcement to Śāriputra that he, too, shall one day become a Buddha. Mahākāśyapa gives voice to their feelings in a parable of the wealthy father and beggar son and restates this in a number of stanzas. Among those stanzas we hear Mahākāśyapa state (KN, 118.3-119.1):

adyo vyaṃ śrāvaka bhūta nātha saṃśrāvayisyām atha cāgrabodhim / bodhīya śabdaṃ ca prakāśayāmasteno vyaṃ śrāvaka bhīṣmakalpāḥ || 4.53 ||

We are now truly listeners, O Protector, and we shall proclaim supreme awakening everywhere and reveal the sound of awakening by which we are formidable disciples (cf. Burnouf 1925, 74).

This verse involves a play on the word *śrāvaka*. The term *śrāvaka* is a *vṛddhi* derivative of the root *śru-* (“to hear”) to which the suffix *-ka* has been appended. The present verse semantically elucidates the word *śrāvaka* through *śrāvayati*, the causative of the same verb. In this instance, the verse seeks to make *śrāvaka* mean two things at the same time, the meaning of “one who hears” found within mainstream Buddhist formations, including Indic heterodox traditions such as Jainism, and the rhetorical meaning that this Mahāyāna sūtra wishes to advocate, “one who enables others to hear.” The idea being that *śrāvakas* receive or hear teachings on the Mahāyāna from the Buddha and, although they neither understand its allusive meaning (*saṃdhābhāṣya*) nor initially practice these teachings themselves, they retain these teachings through memory, and then proclaim the Mahāyāna teachings which they have memorized to those suitable to understand and practice them.¹² I note, as well, that *nirvacana* in this context often has the function of ‘double-signification’ that is routinely seen in Chinese translations of Mahāyāna sūtras from Indic based sources (Deeg 2004).

Transvaluing Mainstream Buddhist Categories of Spiritual Attainment

Semantic elucidation is employed as a type of rhetoric in numerous Mahāyāna sūtras. This type of rhetoric hollows out and rewrites mainstream Buddhist status categories. The mainstream Buddhism in this instance is primarily Abhidharma and *āgama/nikāya* categories of attainment. Mahāyāna texts rewrite these categories through the rhetorical technique of *nirukta* and the ostensive message of skill-in-means of the Buddha through his use of allegorical speech (*ldem po ngag*).

As mentioned, *nirukta* or semantic elucidation, rather than a technique of registering correspondence as found in Brahmanical traditions, becomes a technique of rhetoric for Buddhist groups in which established meanings of key pan-Indic signifiers are hollowed out and re-defined. In early instances of its employment, the terms that become transvalued usually hold some social significance or status in the competing communities of Brāhmaṇas, Jinas, and Buddhists. Status marking classifications or registers of reverence such as

¹² For a similar interpretation of this verse in Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* see (Apple 2016, 105). Note that the ninth century Tibetan Kanjur translation of this verse by Surendrabodhi and Ye shes sde slightly differs from the Tibetan translation found in the *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya* by Kanakavarman and Pa tshab Nyi ma grags (born 1055). The later translation matches the Sanskrit in KN (118.13-119.1).

“Arhant,” “Bhagavant” are shaped by *nirukta* according to the ideals of the community. Similar processes of transvaluation took place within Buddhist authorial communities.

This type of rhetoric presents the Buddha as always having meant that mainstream Buddhist *śrāvaka* stages of attainment, such as the *śraddhānusārin*, *dharmānusārin*, and so forth, were actually referring to *bodhisattvas*. According to the normative representation found in a number of Mahāyāna *sūtras* that employ this rhetoric, the problem was that disciples (*śrāvakas*) did not initially understand what the Buddha intended due to their low motivations aimed at achieving peaceful *nirvāṇa*. In this way, early Mahāyāna *sūtras* employ the instruments of etymology to redefine mainstream Buddhist classifications in terms of being *bodhisattvas*.

An example of this technique of rhetoric is found in the *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra* (Lamotte 1998: 216ff., §149; hereafter, ŚGS). Lamotte translated the relevant section from Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation as follows:

- “1. The bodhisattva in *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* affects to be following the truth under the impulse of faith (*śraddhānusārin*), but he does not rely on others in order to believe.
2. He affects to be following the truth by means of the Dharma (*dharmānusārin*) but, concerning the nature of things (*dharmatā*) and the turning of the Wheel of the Dharma (*dharmacakrapravartana*), he is without irreversibility or shortcoming.
3. He affects to be an eighth-level holy one (*aṣṭamaka*), but for innumerable incalculable cosmic periods (*asaṃkhyeyakalpa*), he travels the path for those who have fallen into the eight corruptions (*aṣṭamithyātvapatita*).
4. He affects to have entered the stream of nirvāṇa (*srotaāpanna*) but, for beings drawn into the stream of saṃsāra (*saṃsārasrotovāhita*), he does not enter the certainty (*niyāma*) [concerning the acquisition of the absolute good].
5. He affects to return only once [among mankind] (*sakṛdāgāmin*), but he shows himself everywhere in all the worlds (*lokadhātu*).
6. He affects not to be reborn again [in the Kāmadhātu] (*anāgāmin*), but he returns once again in order to ripen beings (*sattvapariṣādanārtham*).
7. He affects to be a holy one (*arhant*), but he continues to exert his vigour (*vīryam ārabhate*) in search of the Buddha attributes (*buddhadharmaparyeṣaṇārtham*).
8. He affects to be an ordinary listener (*śrāvaka*), but he teaches the Dharma (*dharma deśayati*) to mankind with unobstructed eloquence (*anāccheyapratibhāna*).
9. He affects to be a Pratyekabuddha but, in order to ripen beings endowed with the power of conditions (*pratyayabalopeta*), he seems to enter Nirvāṇa, then through the power of this samādhi he returns to new births.
10. O devaputras, the bodhisattva who dwells in *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* can make use of various noble modes of speech (*āryavyavahāra*) but, in all the stages (*bhūmi*) where he expounds the Dharma, he does not truly dwell (*na viharati*).”¹³

¹³ Lamotte 1998: 216-217; T. 642, 642c22-643a3: 菩薩住此三昧。為作信行而不隨他信。亦作法行。而於法相轉於法輪不退不失。亦作八人。於諸無量阿僧祇劫。為八邪者而行於道。作須陀洹。為生死水漂流眾生不入法位。作斯陀含。遍現其身於諸世間。作阿那含。亦復來還教化眾生。作阿羅漢。亦常精進求學佛法。亦作聲聞。以無礙辯為人說法。作辟支佛。為欲教化因緣眾生示入涅槃。三昧力故還復出生。諸天子。菩薩住是首楞嚴三昧。皆能遍行諸賢聖行。亦隨其地有所說法而不住中。; see also McRae’s translation (1998: 73-4) which does not fully reflect the nuances of the denaturalized underlying Indic terminology; Tibetan, Peking, vol. 32, no. 800, mdo thu, 329a7-329b5: *byang chub sems dpa’i ting nge ’dzin de la gnas na dad pas rjes su ’brang ba yang yin la / gzan gyi dad pas ’gro ba yang ma yin / chos kyi rjes su ’brang ba yang yin la chos nyid dang / chos kyi ’khor lo bskor bas nyams pa yang ma yin / brgyad pa yang ma yin la log pa brgyad du lhung ba’i sems can rnam kyi phyir bskal pa grangs med par spyod pa yang yin / rgyun tu zhugs pa yang yin la sems can rgyun phyogs su ded pa rnam kyi phyir nyan thos kyi skyon med par yang me*

The ‘word-play’ may be difficult to notice as translated through Chinese or Tibetan but the effects of *nirukta/nirvacana* in this instance are employed to transvalue *śrāvaka* stages of attainment and embody those status signifiers with the values of the bodhisattva way. The ŚGS advocates how a bodhisattva fulfills the status of mainstream categories of Buddhist spiritual attainment according to the values of the ŚGS authorial community. That is, for this particular *sūtra*, *bodhisattvas* attain the status of these mainstream classifications in terms of qualities aimed at full, perfect, Buddhahood. Here, the *bodhisattva* seeks out the true nature (*dharmatā*) of things while taking rebirth to help sentient beings for innumerable aeons and not falling into the certainty of attaining the lower state of peaceful *nirvāṇa*. The bodhisattva gains the status of one who is no longer reborn in the realm of desire, yet continues to take rebirth in order to mature begins while seeking to acquire the attributes of full Buddhahood. Similar to the *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra*, the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra*, as well as one other *sūtra* that I have so far identified, the *Suvikrāntadevaputrapariṣcchā* (Peking 828; Derge 161), apply techniques of *nirukta* to the same nine categories with the intention of indicating how bodhisattvas fulfill the qualities of these spiritual attainments (see Table 1).

ltung / lan cig phyir 'ong yin la 'jig rten gyi khams thams cad du snang ba yang yin / phyir mi 'ong ba 'ang yin la sems can yongs su smin par bya ba'i don du 'ang 'ong / dgra bcom pa 'ang yin la sang rgyas kyis chos yongs su gtsal ba'i phyir brtson 'grus brtsams pa yang yin / nyan thos kyang yin la spobs pa rgyun mi chad pa'i phyir sems can thams cad la chos 'chad pa yang yin / rang sang rgyas kyang yin la / sems can rkyen gyi stobs can rnams kyis ched du bskal pa grang med par spyod par yang byed / sems can rkyen gyi mthu che ba rnams kyis phyir yongs su mya ngan las 'da' par yang ston la / ting nge 'dzin gyi stobs kyis kyang skye ba yin te lta'u dag de ltar byang chub sems dpa' dpa' bar 'gro ba'i ting nge 'dzin la gnas pa ni 'phags pa'i tha dad thams cad kyis kyang tha snyad 'dogs shing / sems can ji lta bu'i sa la gnas pa de dag la yang chos ston las de la gnas par yang mi byed do //

Table 1. Transvalued Terms of Buddhist Spiritual Attainment in Select Mahāyāna Sūtras

Śūraṅgamasamādhi	Avaivartikacakra	Suvikrāntadevaputrapariṣccha
śraddhānusārin	śraddhānusārin	śraddhānusārin
dharmānusārin	dharmānusārin	dharmānusārin
aṣṭamaka	aṣṭamaka	aṣṭamaka
srotaāpanna	srotaāpanna	srotaāpanna
sakṛdāgāmin	sakṛdāgāmin	sakṛdāgāmin
anāgāmin	anāgāmin	anāgāmin
arhant	arhant	arhant
śrāvaka	śrāvaka	śrāvaka
pratyekabuddha	pratyekabuddha	pratyekabuddha
	tathāgata	buddha
	bhagavant	tathāgata
	buddha	bhagavant
		saṃyaksambuddha
		śāstr
		prthagjana
		rāgadharin*
		dveṣadharin*
		mohādharin*
		samsāradharin*
		parinirvāyin*

Table 2. Bhūmis (“stages”) in Select Mahāyāna Sūtras

Sūtras that do not list Ten Stages or Bhūmis	Sūtras that list Ten stages or Bhūmis
Aṣṭasāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā	Buddhāvataṃsaka-nāma-mahāvaiṣṭya-sūtra
Saddharmapuṇḍarīka	Daśabhūmika
Drumakimnaranarājapariṣcchā	Akṣayamatipariṣcchā
Pratyutpanna-buddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi	Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā
Ajātaśatrukaukṛtya-vinodana-	Śūraṅgamasamādhi
Avaivartikacakra	Svapnanirdeśa
Suvikrāntacittadevaputra	
Vimalakīrtinirdeśa	

The *Avaivartikacakra-sūtra*¹⁴ (Pk.906; Derge 240) is classified as a *mahāyāna sūtra* and the Buddha is considered to have taught the discourse 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.

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 *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 progression, such as the Followers-of-Dharma, Once-returned, Non-returned, Arhant, 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 really bodhisattvas who are irreversible from *anuttara-samyaksambodhi*, unsurpassable complete perfect awakening. The *sūtra* persuades its audience through *nirukti* or *nirvacana*.

Several brief examples of *nirukti* in the *Avaivartikacakasūtra* from verses found in the text illustrate its art of persuasion. The *sūtra* elucidates on a particular type of Noble being (*ārya*) found in mainstream forms of Buddhism and then makes a connection through semantic elucidation between the *śrāvaka* type and a *bodhisattva*. Here I provide brief examples that demonstrate this *sūtra*’s elucidation of a Follower-through-Faith (*śraddhānusārin*), Follower-of-Dharma (*dharmānusārin*), Aṣṭamaka (Eighth individual), and Non-returned (*Anāgamin*).

In mainstream forms of Buddhism, particular in Abhidharma discourse, a Follower-through-Faith (*śraddhānusārin*, Tib. *dad pas rjes su brang ba*), that is ‘One who follows by way of Faith’, is an enterer to the result of Stream-enterer (*srota-āpanna-pratipannaka*) with weak faculties who acquires path provisions and realizes truths based on teachings given by others (see Apple 2008). In the discourse of the *Avaivartikacakasūtra* (hereafter AVC) a Follower-through-Faith (*śraddhānusārin*) is a bodhisattva who has faith in the emptiness of all things and believes in the possibility of attaining the gnosis of a Buddha. The AVC reinforces this connection of the bodhisattva with a Follower-through-Faith by its word-play on the Sanskrit word for faith, *śraddhā*:

Whoever attains the power of faith (*śraddhābala*), yet never has faith (*śraddhā*) in the five sensory objects of the desire realm is therefore said to be a Follower-through-Faith

¹⁴ See Apple (2008, 2011) and Handurukande (1973) for an overview of this *sūtra*. The Sanskrit title is found in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* commentaries of both Ārya-Vimuktisena and Haribhadra. For Ārya-Vimuktisena see Pensa (1967, 46), Lee (2017, 99.18): “*Avaivartikacakra sūtre*,” and for Haribhadra see Unrai Wogihara (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* 阿維越致遮經 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, A.D. 284) 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) (A.D. 412–439). The third translation is the *Guangboyanjing butuizhuanlun jing* 廣博嚴淨不退轉輪經 translated by 智嚴 Zhi-yan during the 4th year of Yuan Jia (元嘉), Liusong dynasty (劉宋) (A.D. 427) in Zhi-yuan Monastery (枳園寺) in Yang-du (楊都).

In mainstream forms of Buddhism, particularly in Abhidharma discourse, a Follower-of-Dharma (*dharmānusārin*, Tib. *chos kyi rjes su brang ba*), “One who follows by way of Doctrine,” is an enterer to the result of Stream-enterer who has sharp faculties (*tīkṣṇendriya*), and does not rely on another to pursue cognition of the Nobles’ Four Truths.¹⁶

In the discourse of the AVC the Dharmānusārin is “one who follows the stream of inconceivable dharmas.”¹⁷ The status of Dharmānusārin is achieved in the AVC by apprehending and cultivating the buddha-qualities through cognizing the nature of things (*dharmatā*) while not attaining only one thing (*dharmā*). The *sūtra* redefines the term Dharmānusārin and connects it with a bodhisattva with word-plays on *dharmā*. The following brief excerpt of three verses from the AVC’s chapter on the bodhisattva Dharmānusārin illustrates this :

[1] One who does not turn away from the Buddha qualities (*buddhadharma*) in any way and apprehends 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 and respects the *dharmā* which is explained by the Buddhas and whose mind is fearless is therefore called a Follower-of-Dharma¹⁸

An Aṣṭamaka (Tib. *brgyad pa*, Pāli *aṭṭhamaka*), “Eighth individual,” is traditionally the lowest among the eight *āryapudgalas* in mainstream Buddhist scholasticism. For some Abhidharma commentators, the Eighth individual is an enterer to the result of Stream-enterer who is separated from attachment previous to the path of seeing (*vītarāgapūrvin*).¹⁹ In the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* a *bodhisattva* is classified as an Aṣṭamaka by employing word-plays related to numerical categories containing eight (*aṣṭa*) items. A brief example is the following verse that provides a summary through *nirvacana* of the content stated in the corresponding prose portion of the *sūtra*:

[1] One who passes beyond the eight perversions (*aṣṭamityatva*) while contacting the eighth liberations (*aṣṭavimokṣa*) and not having attachment to the eight realities is therefore called an “Eighth” (*aṣṭamaka*).²⁰

¹⁵. *Avaivartikacakra*, Chapter 2E, verse 4 (S 321a1): ‘*dod pa*’i yon tan rnam lnga la / rtag tu dad pa ma yin te / dad pa’i stobs ni rjes thob pa / de phyir dad pas ’brang bar gsung /.

¹⁶. See Apple (2008:145-55) for definitions of the *dharmānusārin* in the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Abhidharma-samuccaya*.

¹⁷. *Avaivartikacakra*, Chapter 3C, verses 1d-2a (D. 253a2): *chos rjes ’brang zhes gsungs / chos rgyun bsam gyis mi khyab pa* (≈ *acintya-dharma-śrota-anusāri*).

¹⁸. *Avaivartikacakra*, 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 rnam 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 /*

¹⁹. See Apple (2008:153-56) for definitions of this spiritual classification in the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Abhidharmasamuccaya*.

²⁰. *Avaivartikacakra*, Chapter 4C, verse 1 (S 326a4): [1] / *log pa brgyad las shin tu ’das // rnam par thar pa brgyad la reg / yang dag brgyad la zhen pa med // de’i phyir brgyad pa zhes brjod do /*.

The AVC continues describing the Aṣṭamaka bodhisattva as embodying qualities of sameness (*samatā*) in relation to the realm of reality (*dharmadhātu*). Cognizing “the sameness of all dharmas” (Skt. *sarvadharmasamatā*) is an important doctrine which occurs in a number of Mahāyāna sūtras (Demiéville, 1937:270-6) such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (Lamotte 1976:55, 93, 163). The chapter on the Aṣṭamaka in the AVC concludes through connecting this bodhisattva classification with sameness and the ever-present state of awakening (*bodhi*).

A “Stream-enterer” (*srota-āpanna*, Tib. *rgyun du zhugs pa*) is generally the first degree of Noble being who has entered the stream leading to *nirvāṇa*. A Stream-enterer will never be reborn as a hell-being, hungry ghost, or animal. A Stream-enterer has abandoned the false view toward the perishable aggregates (*satkāyadrṣṭi*), doubt (*vicikitsā*), and holding that ethics and rituals are supreme (*śilavrataparāmarśa*).²¹ In the discourse of the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra*, a bodhisattva is classified as a Stream-enterer through entering into the stream of inconceivable Buddhahood. The AVC redefines this classification based on a number of word-plays on the term “stream” (*srota*) and states that the bodhisattva Stream-enterer is “one who enters the stream of the Buddha’s inconceivable path.”²² In the AVC, the bodhisattva Stream-enterer engages in the sameness of all dharmas through realizing the false view of the perishable aggregates.

A Non-returner (*anāgāmin*, Tib. *phyir mi ’ong ba*), in general, is a type of Noble Being who will never be reborn in the desire realm (*kāmadhātu*), but attains *nirvāṇa* in one of the form realm heavens (*ārūpyādhātu*) based upon the removal of seventy-two path of cultivation defilements in Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma systems. A Non-returner has removed all five inferior fetters (*pañca avarabhāgīya*) but none of the five superior fetters (*pañca ūrdhva-bhāgīya*).²³ When the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* discusses the Once-returner (*sakṛdāgamin*) as well as the Non-returner (*anāgāmin*) the word-play focuses on the lack of any ultimate coming (*agata*) or going (*gamanam*). As briefly discussed below, the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra*, like a number of other Mahāyāna sūtras composed from the 1st to 3rd centuries c.e., is written from the perspective of infinity, or ultimate reality, a state in which all things are empty (*śūnya*), unborn (*anutpanna*), undifferentiated (*asambheda*), and imperishable (*akṣaya*). As mentioned in the *Akṣayamatīnirdeśasūtra*, *Kāśyapaparivarta*, and the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the *tathatā* “suchness of things,” the highest reality connected with the *dharmadhātu*, is “beyond coming and going” (*gatyāgati*) (Braarvig 1993, vol. I, lxiii). The discourse of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* repeatedly plays on this notion in redefining the Non-returner as a bodhisattva. The following verse illustrates this word-play:

Here, one does not objectify (*anupalambana*) that things substantially either come (*agati*) or go (*gati*); through attaining [the state that is] without coming (*anagati*) or going (*agamana*) one is called a Non-returner (Anāgamin)²⁴

²¹ See Apple (2008:117-122) for definitions of the Stream-enterer in the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Abhidharmasamuccaya*.

²² *Avaivartikacakra*, Chapter 5C, verse 1 (D. 255b): *bsam du med pa sangs rgyas lam...rgyun la gzhol* (≈ *acintya-buddha-mārga-śrota-āpannaḥ*).

²³ For an analysis of the different lists of *anāgāmins* and debates about their interpretation in early Indian Buddhist traditions see Lin (2012) and for definitions of this spiritual classification in the *Abhidharmakośa* and *Abhidharmasamuccaya* see Apple (2008:124–137).

²⁴ *Avaivartikacakra*, Chapter 7C, verse 4 on the Non-returner (*anāgamin*) (S 259b6): *’dir ni chos rnams ’ong*

The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* provides word-plays on several other mainstream Buddhist status terms as well. The *sūtra* perhaps provides the earliest evidence for a two-fold *nirukta* of Arhant, who is elucidated as one who destroys (*hanta*) the afflictions (*ari*) of all sentient beings or one who is worthy (*arhayati*) of causing others to obtain inconceivable *bodhi*.²⁵ The AVC states at the beginning of its chapter on Arhants:

Ānanda, how is it that the Tathāgata, the Arhant, the complete, perfect Buddha thoroughly indicates the bodhisattva, the mahāsattva as an Arhant? Ānanda, regarding this, the bodhisattva, the mahāsattva is one who destroys carrying out the activities of limited religious practice and is one who is worthy to achieve the activity of liberating all sentient beings. He is one who destroys all afflictions and is worthy to liberate from afflictions sentient beings, sentient beings who suffer.²⁶

Echoing the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, a *śrāvaka* in the *Avaivartikacakra sūtra* is one who proclaims unelaborated, pacified, awakening.²⁷ In all, nine terms for mainstream Buddhist spiritual status are hollowed out and reconstituted—Aṣṭamaka (‘The Eighth’), Sakṛdāgamin (‘Once-returned’), Anāgamin (‘Non-returned’), Pratyekabuddha among others—as signifying bodhisattvas in the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*.

Another *sūtra*, the *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrāparipṛcchā* (D 161;P 828)²⁸, like the *Avaivartacakra* and the *Śūramgamasamādhī*, presents and rewrites how bodhisattvas may be considered within mainstream Buddhist status terms of attainment. The *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrāparipṛcchā* in its Tibetan version consists of three volumes which consist of a dialogue between Mañjuśrī and a Devaputra. The discourse focuses on a range of topics including dependent-arising, non-duality, and the nature of the *dharmadhātu* that cover thirty-two questions that the Devaputra asks of Mañjuśrī. A number of these questions focus on how a bodhisattva can take on the status or have the nomenclature of a *śrāvaka* spiritual attainment. The *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrāparipṛcchā* rewrites through semantic elucidation the *śraddhā-*

ba dang // 'gro bdag kyang mi dmigs te // 'ong dang 'gro ba med thob pas // de ni phyir mi 'ong zhes brjod /.

^{25.} Centuries after the AVC, these two etymologies also appear among the five for the corresponding Pāli term *arahant* in Buddhaghosa’s (ca. fifth century) *Visuddhimagga* (see Verhagen 2017, 252, note 28 for references). The Indian scholar Haribhadra (late eighth century) provides a twofold etymology of Arhant in his *Abhisamayālamkāraḥ*, the first based on the root *arh* “to be worthy” (Wogihara 1973:9.8-9) and the second as “one who as destroyed (*hata*) the foe (*ari*)” (Wogihara 1973:10.18). Indian and Tibetan translators (ninth century) of Sanskrit and other Indic sources into Tibetan were aware of this twofold etymology, see Hopkins (1999:174) and Scherrer-Schaub (1999:71) on this point.

^{26.} *Avaivartikacakra*, Chapter 8A (D 260b): *// kun dga' bo ji ltar de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas kyis / byang chub sems dpa' sems dpa' chen po dgra bcom par yongs su bstan ce na / kun dga' bo 'di la byang chub sems dpa' sems dpa' chen po ni / gang nyi tshe ba'i spyod pa'i spyad pa de thams cad ni bcom / gang sems can thams cad bsgrol ba'i spyod pa de dag ni sgrub par 'os so // des nyon mongs pa thams cad bcom pa yin te / sems can gang dag sdug bsngal ba'i sems can rnam nyon mongs pa de dag las rnam par 'grel bar 'os te /.*

^{27.} *Avaivartikacakra*, Chapter 9C (D 266a): *byang chub zhi ba spros pa med/ rnyog pa med pa sgrogs par byed/*

^{28.} The *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrāparipṛcchā* has been translated into Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongolian. The Chinese was translated by Dharmarakṣa between the 2nd year of Tai Shih (泰始) and the 1st year of Chien Hsing (建興), Western Chin dynasty (西晉) (A.D. 266-313) as the *Xuzhen tianzi jing* 須真天子經. According to Boucher (2006:23) it was translated in late January/early February of 266 at the White Horse Monastery in Chang’an. The Tibetan translation, *Phags pa lha'i bu rab rtsal sems kyis zhus pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*, was made by Prajñāvarma and Ye-shes-sde in the ninth century.

nusārin (*mdo sde, ba*, D 126a7–126b2), *dharmānusārin* (D 126b2–126b6), Aṣṭamaka (D 126b6–127a2), Stream-enterer (127a2–127a6) Sakṛdāgamin (127a6–127b2), Anāgamin (127b2–127b5), Arhant (127b5–127a3), Śrāvaka (128a3–128b1), and Pratyekabuddha (128b1–128b4) among others as actually referring to bodhisattvas.

The *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā* rewrites a Follower-through-Faith (*śraddhānusārin*) as follows:

Mañjuśrī said, “Devaputra, when a bodhisattva places *faith* in all the qualities of a Buddha (*buddhadharma*) and even if placing *faith* in attachments does not become attached to them, does not go through the *faith* of another, generates and apprehends *faith* for the path of the six perfections (*pāramitā*), is liberated from becoming attached through attachment, seeks out the wisdom that is without attachment, does not become attached to *samsāra*, does not fall away from *nirvāṇa*, by just that, Devaputra, a bodhisattva is a Follower-through-Faith (*śraddhānusārin*).²⁹

The word-play in this section focuses on “faith” (*śraddhā*) and also plays on the term for “attachment” although it is not clear what the underlying Sanskrit for this term would be. The word-play for Follower-of-Dharma is a little bit more discernable as the authors try to make a number of connections with the term *dharma* and qualities they associate with a *bodhisattva*. The *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā* rewrites a Follower-of-Dharma (*dharmānusārin*) as follows:

The Devaputra asked, “Mañjuśrī, how is it that a bodhisattva is a Follower-of-Dharma?” Mañjuśrī replied, “Devaputra, when a bodhisattva thoroughly apprehends and understands the teaching by all the Buddhas, possesses the *nourishment of dharma* but is without nourishment from material things, stands firm in the *dharma* but does not take a stand in defilement, is one with the power of *dharma* (*dharmabala*) but not the power of pride, is a *preacher of dharma* (*dharmabhāṇaka*) but not a preacher of worldly things, is a *lord of dharma* (*dharmeśvara*) but is not a lord of defilement, is one who relies on the *dharma* but does not rely on the person, is a speaker of *dharma* but does not speak of non-*dharma*, relies on the *dharma* which accords with things (*dharma*) but does not stand in the *dharma* which relinquishes effort, he understands all things (*dharma*) as the flawless Dharma, is without attachment in the doors of *dhāraṇī*, possesses the seven [inner] treasures, fully apprehends the holy *dharma*, stands firm in the distinction of *dharma*, then in this way, Devaputra, a bodhisattva is a Follower-of-Dharma.³⁰

^{29.} *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā* (D 126a7–126b2; S 399b2–4): *jam dpal gyis smras pa / lha'i bu gang gi tshe byang chub sems dpa' sangs rgyas kyi chos thams cad la dad par byed pa dang / chags pa thams cad la dad par byed kyang de la chags par mi 'gyur ba dang / gzhān gyi dad pas mi 'gro ba dang / pha rol tu phyin pa drug gi lam la dad pa skyed cing 'dzin par byed pa dang / chags pas chags par gyur ba rnam thar bar byed pa dang / chags pa med pa'i ye shes yongs su tshol bar byed pa dang / 'khor ba la chags par mi byed pa dang / mya ngan las 'das par mi ltung de tsam gyis na lha'i bu byang chub sems dpa' dad pas rjes su 'brang ba yin no //.*

^{30.} *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā* (D 126b2–126b6; S 399b4–400a3): *lha'i bus smras pa / 'jam dpal ji ltar na byang chub sems dpa' chos kyi rjes su 'brang ba yin / 'jam dpal gyis smras pa / lha'i bu gang gi tshe byang chub sems dpa' sangs rgyas thams cad kyi gsungs pa 'dzin par byed pa dang / kun 'dzin par byed pa dang / chos kyi zas dang ldan zhing zang zing gi zas med pa dang / chos la gnas kyi nyon mongs pa la mi gnas pa dang / chos kyi stobs can yin gyis nga rgyal gyi stobs can ma yin pa dang / chos smra ba yin gyi 'jig rten rgyang pan pa'i gdam smra ba ma yin pa dang / chos kyi dbang phyug yin gyi nyon mongs pa'i dbang phyug ma yin pa dang / chos la rton pa yin gyi gang zag la rton pa ma yin pa dang / chos smra smra ba yin gyi chos ma yin par mi smra ba dang / chos kyi rjes su 'thun pa'i chos la rton pa yin gyi brison pa btang pa'i chos la mi gnas pa dang / chos skyon med pa nyid du chos thams cad shes par byed pa dang / gzungs kyi sgo chags pa med pa dang ldan pa dang / nor bdun dang ldan pa dang / dam pa'i chos yongs su 'dzin par byed pa dang / chos kyi khyad par la gnas pa de lta na lha'i bu byang chub sems dpa' chos kyi rjes su 'brang ba yin no /.*

The *sūtra* makes a number of semantic connections between *dharma* and *dharmānusārin* in its transvaluing of this state to that of a bodhisattva. As in the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*, the *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā* connects through word-play qualities connected with the number eight (*aṣṭa*) in its transvaluing of the “Eighth Individual.” The *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā* states:

The Devaputra asked, “Mañjuśrī, how is it that a bodhisattva is an Eighth (*aṣṭamaka*)?” Mañjuśrī replied, Devaputra, when a bodhisattva goes well beyond the eight perversions (*aṣṭau ca mithyātvāni*), stands firm in the eight realities, is skilled in training in the eightfold path (*aṣṭāṅgamārga*), does not escape through a path in which endeavors are incomplete, sets sentient beings who are born in the eight unfortunate states (*aṣṭāvaksanāh*) toward the perfect excellent conditions, stands firm in the eight realizations of a holy person, concentrates upon the eight liberations (*aṣṭavimokṣa*), and does not abandon the higher resolve of a bodhisattva, then, in this way, Devaputra, a bodhisattva is an Eighth.”³¹

I think that the corresponding sections between the *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā*, the *Avaivartikacakra*, and the *Śūramgamasamādhi* indicates mutual influence as the same categories are being transvalued, and in some instances, the same phrases of semantic elucidation are employed. Table 1 provides a comparison of these terms found in these three *sūtras*. The Nepalese Sanskrit version of the *Pañcaviṃśatiprajñāpāramitā* is the only extant Mahāyāna *sūtra* in Sanskrit to mention these nine terms together (Kimura 2010: 28, 103, 120). As far as I have been able to locate, these four *sūtras* are the only ones to mention these specific nine terms together.

Another discourse, the *Samvṛtiparamārthasatyānirdeśa*, “Teaching on the Conventional and Ultimate Realities,” also employs semantic elucidation to briefly transvalue nine terms for mainstream Buddhist spiritual attainment. Similar to the *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā*, the *Samvṛtiparamārthasatyānirdeśa* consists of a dialogue between Mañjuśrī and a Devaputra and was also translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa in the late third century. The content of the *Samvṛtiparamārthasatyānirdeśa*, however, focuses on explaining various Buddhist topics according to either ultimate (*paramārtha*) or conventional (*saṃvṛti*) reality. The discourse briefly elucidates on stages of spiritual attainment in the following excerpt:

Then the Devaputra Lord of Supreme Peace asked Mañjuśrī Kumārabhūta, “Mañjuśrī, how is the spiritual community of listeners (*śrāvaka*) that belong to the Bhagavant, Tathāgata, Arhant, Perfect Buddha Ratnaketu?” Mañjuśrī replied, “Ultimately, they are not Followers-through-Faith (*śradhdhānusārin*), but they are also not one who has faith in another. Ultimately, they are not Followers-of-the-Family (*rigs kyi rjes su 'gro ba≈ kulamkula?*), but neither do they ultimately abandon the family of the Tathāgata. Ultimately, they are not Followers-of-Dharma (*dharmānusārin*), in fact, ultimately they do not observe any Dharma at all. Ultimately, they are

³¹. *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā* (D 126b6–127a2; S 400a3–7): / lha'i bus smras pa / 'jam dpal ji ltar na byang chub sems dpa' brgyad pa yin / 'jam dpal gyis smras pa / lha'i bu gang gi tshe byang chub sems dpa' log ba nyid brgyad las yang dag par 'das pa dang / yang dag pa nyid brgyad la rab tu gnas pa dang / lam yan lag brgyad pa rnam par sbyang ba la mkhas pa dang / sbyor ba yongs su ma rdzogs par lam des nges par 'byung bar mi byed pa dang / [D127a] mi khom pa brgyad du skyes pa'i sems can rnam dal ba phun sum tshogs pa dag la 'god par byed pa dang / skyes bu dam pa'i rnam par rtogs pa brgyad la gnas pa dang / rnam par thar pa brgyad la bsam gtan byed pa dang / byang chub sems dpa'i lhag/ ba'i bsam pa mi spong ba de lta na lha'i bu byang chub sems dpa' brgyad pa yin no /.

not an *Aṣṭamaka* yet conventionally they do not possess the eight mistaken dharmas. [D250b] Ultimately they are not Stream-enterers (*srota-āpanna*), yet in terms of worldly conventional reality they have passed beyond all the lower realms. Ultimately they are not Once-returners (*sakṛdāgāmin*), yet conventionally they do return in order to mature sentient beings. Ultimately they are not Non-returners (*anāgāmin*), yet conventionally there is no return from anything. Ultimately they are not Arhants, yet according to worldly conventions they are supremely worthy of worship by the world along with its gods. Ultimately they are not listeners, yet, in the manner of non-apprehension (*mi dmigs pa'i tshul gyis ≈ anupalambha-yogena*) they do listen to all the Bhagavants Buddhas.³²

The *Samvṛtiparamārthasatyanirdeśa* elucidates nine terms of spiritual attainment like the other discourses that have been discussed. However, the *Samvṛtiparamārthasatyanirdeśa* elucidates the Followers-of-the-Family (*rigs kyi rjes su 'gro ba ≈ kulamkula?*), which the other discourses do not mention, and leaves out the *Pratyekabuddha* which is mentioned by the others.

The *Śūraṅgamasamādhi*, *Avaivartikacakra*, *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā*, along with the *Samvṛtiparamārthasatyanirdeśa*, are the only *sūtras* that I have been currently able to identify that transform and transvalue mainstream Buddhist terms of spiritual attainment through semantic elucidation. The *Avaivartikacakra* seems especially influenced by the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* in terms of its narrative structure and doctrinal exposition. The first bodhisattva listed in the *nidāna* of the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* is named “Avaivartikadharmacakra-pravartaka” (“Setting turning the irreversible Wheel of the Dharma”) (Lamotte 1998: 107). In a latter portion of the *sūtra*, Mañjuśrī explains to the assembly that the Buddha in the Ekapradīpa universe in the zenith region (*upariṣṭhād diśi*) has a Buddha-field which only contains bodhisattvas who are “ceaselessly expounding the irreversible Wheel of the Dharma (*avaivartikadharmacakra*)” (Lamotte 1998:199). The Buddha then explains that he himself manifests there and teaches the “irreversible Wheel of the Dharma” (Lamotte 1998:200).

The orientation of these *sūtras* to speak of the emptiness of all dharmas, non-duality, and realm of reality (*dharmadhātu*) also indicates some type of overlapping relations between them. Notably, as well, is the absence of any discussion of bodhisattva stages in the *Avaivartikacakra*, *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā*, and *Samvṛtiparamārthasatyanirdeśa*. As Lamotte (1998:43) notes, *sūtras* such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, *Pratyutpanna-Buddha-Saṃmukhāvasthita-Samādhi-Sūtra*, the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi*, *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, and the *Sukhāvātīvyūha* represent proto-Mahāyāna in the course of formation. The bodhisattva

³² *Samvṛtiparamārthasatyanirdeśa* (Tibetan, D. 250a5: / *de nas lha'i bu rab tu zhi ba rnam par dul ba'i dbang phyug gis 'jam dpal gzhon nur gyur pa la 'di skad smras so // 'jam dpal bcom ldan 'das de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas rin po che'i tog de'i nyan thos kyi dge 'dun de ci 'dra / 'jam dpal gyis smras pa / don dam par na dad pa'i rjes su 'gro ba yang ma yin / gzhan la dad pas 'gro ba yang ma yin no // don dam par na rigs kyi rjes su 'gro ba yang ma yin te / don dam par na de bzhin gshegs pa'i rigs kyang mi gtong ngo // don dam par na chos kyi rjes su 'gro ba yang ma yin te / don dam par na chos gang yang mi dmigs so // don dam par na brgyad pa yang ma yin te / kun rdzob tu na log pa'i chos brgyad dang yang [250b1] bral lo // don dam par na rgyun du zhugs pa yang ma yin te / 'jig rten gyi tha snyad kyi bden par na ngan song thams cad las kyang 'das so // don dam par na lan cig phyir 'ong ba yang ma yin te / kun rdzob tu na sems can yongs su smin par bya ba'i phyir yang 'ong ngo // don dam par na phyir mi 'ong ba yang ma yin te / kun rdzob tu na chos thams cad las 'ong ba med do // don dam par na dgra bcom pa yang ma yin te / 'jig rten gyi tha snyad du na lha dang bcas pa'i 'jig rten gyis bla na med pa'i mchod par 'os pa yang yin no / don dam par na nyan thos kyang ma yin te / mi dmigs pa'i tshul gyis sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das thams cad las thos pa yang 'dzin to / ...*

path at the time of the formulation of these *sūtras* was not complete, necessarily coherent, or structured into a systematic explanation of stages (see Table 2). Previous scholars (Braarvig 1993: cxxv) have noted that references to ten stages (*daśabhūmi*) serves as a demarcator between earlier and later Mahāyāna sūtras as various lists of courses (*caryā*) and stages (*bhūmi*) were initially formulated among various authorial communities.³³ The authorial communities of the *Avaiartikacakra* and *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā* were 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 *nirvacana* on the part of the authorial communities of this literature, to redefine and re-describe mainstream Buddhist ideal figures so as to accommodate them as bodhisattvas and assimilate mainstream classifications of spiritual attainment into the emergent ideology of universal accessibility to full complete awakening among social movements classified as “Mahāyāna.” *Nirvacana* or *nirukta*, as one form of rhetoric among others, serves to transform *śrāvaka* terminology into Mahāyāna Buddhist ideals.

Now, one may ask if the citations I have provided from the *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā*, the *Avaiartikacakra*, and the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* are actually instances of *nirukta* or *nirvacana*. The *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* and *Suvikrāntacintadevaputrapariṣcchā* citations do not seem to accord exactly with the structured formula for *nirukta* although they do seem to involve word-play. With the *Avaiartikacakra*, however, we do have commentarial evidence that traditional Indian Buddhist scholars considered its statements as *nirukta*. Kamalaśīla while explaining the term *bhagavant* comments in his *Ārya-Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇīṭikā* (D 4000) as follows:

Or in another way, he is completely free from fear since he has attained the four fearlessnesses, by means of semantic elucidation one calls a “bhagavant” as such as stated from the *Ārya-avaivartikacakra-sūtra*: “He thoroughly indicates (*pradarśitaḥ*) to living beings (*dehinām*) that things are similar to space. He is fearless (*nirbhayatā*) with respect to that. Therefore, he is called “Bhagavant.””³⁴

Along these lines, Avalokitavrata (7th century?) states in his *Prajñāpradīpaṭīkā* (D 3859):

Or in another way, the Blessed One has **stated a semantic elucidation** from the *Ārya-avaivartikacakra-sūtra*: “In the way that childish beings have imputed, in that way awakening is not found, since all things cannot be found, therefore, he is called *Tathāgata*.”³⁵

³³ The early accounts of a bodhisattva’s development were enumerated in varying lists of courses (*caryā*) and stages (*bhūmi*) of which the earliest extant textual evidence is found in Gāndhārī, see Tournier (2017:195-225) and Salomon (2018:276-279).

³⁴ *Ārya-Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇīṭikā* (D 4000) [126a]: yang na mi jigs pa bzhi thob nas jigs pa ma lus pa dang bral bas nges pai tshig gi tshul gyis bcom ldan das zhes bya ste/ phags pa phyir mi ldog pai khor loi mdo las/ /nam mkha dra bai chos dag ni/ /lus can rnam la rab ston kyang/ /di la jigs pa med pa ste/ / [126b] de bas bcom ldan das zhes bya/ /zhes ji skad gsungs pa lta buo/

³⁵ *Prajñāpradīpaṭīkā* (D 3859): yang na bcom ldan das nyid kyis phags pa phyir mi ldog pai khor loi mdo las/ ji ltar byis pas rnam brtags pa/ /de ltar byang chub mi rnyed de/ /chos kun rnyed pa med pas na/ /de phyir de

Finally, the Indian exegete Śākyamitra explains the Sanskrit term “tathāgata” through semantic elucidation in the context of describing the Tathāgata Vairocana:

Because of realizing (**adhigama*) reality (*dharmatā*) in exactly the way (*tathā*) that previous Buddhas realized [it, Vairocana] is a Buddha, that is, a Tathāgata, because “gone” (*gata*) means “to realize” [and therefore *tathāgata* means “realizes (reality) in exactly the way (previous Buddhas realized it)”. Or, in another way, because of teaching phenomena in exactly the way they exist, **through a semantic elucidation** in which letters have been transformed, it is Tathāgata.³⁶

The Sanskrit for the Tibetan phrase “*nges pa'i tshig gi tshul gyis*” (‘by means of semantic elucidation’) is *nairukta vidhānena* (with some variants) and is attested in Haribhadra’s *Abhisamayālaṃkāralokā*³⁷ and Yaśomitra’s *Sphuṭārthā Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*.³⁸ It is not clear what this phrase signifies for Indian commentators and the topic needs further research. It may be for such commentators that statements attributed to the Buddha as *buddhavacana* are authoritative in employing *nirvacana* and if a connection of verbal roots is made through *nirvacana* in *buddhavacana* such word-play is authoritative for glossing terms. Indian Buddhist commentators seem to use the phrase as self-evident and authoritative without need of explanation of what *nairukta vidhānena* is for them.]

Conclusion

To conclude, I have suggested that semantic elucidation serves as a powerful ideological tool for authorial communities in the propagation of Mahāyāna texts. From the examples drawn from such sūtras such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*, *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, and *Avaivartikacakra*, the ‘method of *nairukta*’ (*nairukta-vidhānena*), through processes of transvaluation and substitution, hollows out mainstream Buddhist understandings of concepts and principles and reformulates the conceptual framework found in mainstream Buddhist formations toward visions of the bodhisattva way found in nascent Mahāyāna communities.

List of Abbreviations

AK	<i>Abhidharmakośa</i>
AVC	<i>Avaivartikacakrasūtra</i>
D	Dergé Kanjur or Tanjur
KN	<i>Saddharmapuṇḍarīka</i> , ed. by Hendrik Kern and Bunyiu Nanjio 南條文雄
ŚGS	<i>Śūraṃgamasamādhināmamahāyānasūtra</i>

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bzhin gshegs zhes bya/ /zhes nges pai tshig ji skad bka stsal pa lta buo/ /

³⁶ Śākyamitra’s *Kosala-alamkārayatattvasaṃgrahaṭīka* (P3326, vol. 70, 192.4.5-192.4.6): *sngon gyi sangs rgyas rnams kyis ji ltar thugs su chud pa de bzhin du chos nyid thugs su chud pas na sangs rgyas ni de bzhin gshegs pa ste gshegs pa na thugs su chud pa'i don yin pa'i phyir ro // yang na chos rnams ji ltar gnas pa de bzhin du ston par mdzad pas na nges pa'i tshig gi tshul gyis yi ge bsgyur ba byas pas de bzhin gshegs pa'o /*.

³⁷ Wogihara edition, pp. 8.6, 11.8. 65.24.

³⁸ Wogihara edition, pp. 93.12 (ad AK 2.1), 141.16 (ad AK 2.49), 339.20 (ad AK 3.87), 406.26 (ad AK 4.62), 487.33 (ad AK 5.47), 488.8 (ad AK), 573.16 (ad AK 6.11).

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