

# On *Avaivartika* and *Avaivartikacakra* in Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature with Special Reference to the Lotus Sūtra

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## Introduction

The concept of the irreversible (*avaivartika*) bodhisattva is considered to be one of the more intriguing subjects in the historical development of Mahāyāna Buddhism due to the concept's prevalence, yet obscure meaning, in many Mahāyāna sūtras. The term occurs in a great number of sūtras in a variety of different forms within various contexts. In most instances the term and its related forms designate a certain status of attainment on the way to full Buddhahood. The term generally signifies a point reached in the career of a bodhisattva after which there can be no turning back from the attainment of full Buddhahood. The concept of *avaivartika* (generally translated in Chinese as 不退 *bu tui*, Jpn. *futai*, “non-regression” or transliterated from the Indic as 阿惟越致 *a wei ye zhi*, Jpn. *ayuiocchi* [=avivartiya, avivartya] or 阿鞞跋致 *a bi ba zhi*, Jpn. *abibacchi* [=avivartika])<sup>1)</sup> has great importance in contemporary strands of Mahāyāna Buddhism found in China, Japan, and Tibet.

In East Asian forms of Buddhism the term has significance for almost all groups who are devoted to a particular Mahāyāna sūtra or Mahāyāna based Buddhist practice. This includes groups centered around the Pure Land sūtras, followers of the *Avatamsaka*, as well as traditions devoted to the Lotus sūtras, such as Tiantai and Nichiren based groups. Each one of the Mahāyāna sūtras that these groups are devoted

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1) East Asian equivalents are given in Frédéric Girard, *Vocabulaire du bouddhisme japonais*, Tome I:A-K, 2008: 1–2, and found in numerous dictionaries as well as exempla from primary Chinese and Japanese sources.

ed to mention *avaivartika* as a term of high status for bodhisattvas. The long history of Buddhism in China and Japan has witnessed specific doctrinal developments around the term *avaivartika* with a variety of permutations that are particular to East Asia. A brief example is the coalescence of the term 不退 “irreversible” with the notions of “not falling back” (不退轉 *butui zhuan*) and “assurance” (尼夜摩, Skt. *niyāma*) found in Pure Land doctrines. Indeed, a great amount modern scholarship on *avaivartika* (*avinivartaniya*) is based on the analysis or study of Pure Land primary sources.<sup>2)</sup>

In Tibetan forms of Buddhism, from the ninth century onward, irreversible bodhisattvas are discussed in the context of the *Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (Tib. *mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan*) and its related commentaries on the Prajñāpāramitā literature. The Tibetan commentarial exegesis of *avaivartika* takes place in the context of special instructions regarding the *saṃgha* jewel which is considered to consist of irreversible Noble Bodhisattvas (*āryāvaivartikabodhisattva*). Tibetan commentators will also include Maitreya-nātha's *Ratnagotravibhāga Mahāyanottaratantraśāstra* in their discussion of the topic. In brief, for Tibetan scholiasts, the *Mahāyāna saṃgha* jewel, among the three traditional jewels of refuge (*triratna*) consists of irreversible (*avaivartika*) bodhisattvas as all *bodhisattvas* who are training in the path of *prajñāpāramitā* are considered to be irreversible.

As a contribution toward understanding the concept of the *avaivartika bodhisattva*, this paper investigates *avaivartika* (along with its equivalents) and *avaivartikacakra* in a select number of self-proclaimed Mahāyāna sūtras. The paper examines the development and formation of *avaivartika* as a status marking term in Mahāyāna sūtras and explains its rhetorical use among bodhisattva authorial communities. The paper then discusses the use of the term *avaivartikacakra* in Mahāyāna discourse with special attention to its occurrence in the *Saddharmaṣuṇḍarīka* (Lotus sūtra).

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2) See, for instance, the work of Myōhō Igarashi, 『正定聚不退転の研究』 *Shōjōju futaiten no kenkyū*. Tōkyō: Daitō Shuppansha, 1999.

### Avaiartika and corresponding Indic terms

As Edgerton (1953: 79a) notes in his *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, *avaiartika*, “not liable to turning back” is the the most common form among many equivalents of the term found in Buddhist literature. Other Indic equivalents are *anivart(i)ya*, *avivart(i)ya*, *avinivartya*. *Anivarta* (Edgerton 1953: 25a) is an adjective signifying “not liable to turning back,” and occurs with *anivartana-caryā* or *avivarta-caryā*, “the course or stage (of a Bodhisattva’s development in which he is) incapable of backsliding.” *Anivartikabala* is also the name of a former Buddha according to the *Mahāvastu* (I.138.13). *Avinivartanāya* (Edgerton 1953: 78), “incapable of turning back,” occurs commonly with the term bodhisattva and signifies that a person is destined for unsurpassable full awakening. A related form to these terms is with conjugations of *vivartati* (Skt. *vart-* with *vi*; Edgerton 1953:499b) “falls back, backslides” particularly in the *Mahāvastu* (I.77.4; 79.9ff, 80.1;89.9ff; 90.6ff; 96.2ff; 110.5; 120.6ff; 127.2ff) where a bodhisattva may backslide, or not backslide, from one ground or stage (*bhūmi*) to a lower one. This use is illustrated in the *Mahāvastu* I.63.11–15, although only partially, where the Buddha explains to Mahāmaudgalyāyana the significance of *anuloma-caryā* and *avivarta-caryā*:

*katamā ca anulomacaryā//iha mahāmaudgalyāyana bodhisatvo mahāsatvo bodhāya anulomatāye sthito bhavati//iyam mahāmaudgalyāyana . . .*

*. . . avivartacaryā//vivartanti saṃsaranti vivartacaryā//avaiartiyā bodhāya bhavanti avivartacaryā//*

“And what is the “conforming” career? In this career, the great being, the Bodhisattva, is established in conformity with his (future) enlightenment. This, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, [is “conforming” career.] [And what is the] “perserving” career? *Vivartacaryā* means that Bodhisattvas fall away and go again through the round of rebirths. *Avivartacaryā* means

that they are unwaveringly set for awakening.”<sup>3)</sup>

### Irreversible (avaivartika) Bodhisattvas

The general characteristics of the *avaivartika bodhisattva* has been described and discussed by Étienne Lamotte in a number of his works, particularly in his translations of the 大智度論 *Dazhidulun* (T. 1509), the *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra)* (5 volumes, 1944–1980), the *Vimalakīrtinīrdeśa* (1976), and the *Śūrangamasamādhisūtra* (1965/ 1998). Lamotte provides a summary analysis of the topic based on a range of Mahāyāna sūtras and śāstras.<sup>4)</sup>

Lamotte notes that bodhisattvas are truly considered *avaivartika* when they obtain *anutpattikadharmakṣānti*, the receptivity toward understanding that dharmas are unproduced. This is generally considered a quality of the eighth *bhūmi*, the *Acalā*, also called *avivartyabhūmi* or *avaivartikabhūmi*. But as Lamotte explains, the subject matter of the *avaivartika* is one of the most obscure in Mahāyāna literature, despite the long chapters in the *Prajñāpāramitā (Aṣṭāsahasrikā*, pp. 665–92; *Pañcaviṃśati*, T 223, ch.16, pp. 339a–341b) consecrated to this topic.

The obscurity of understanding *avaivartika* is because the term may refer to a number of different stages conceived within the structure of a bodhisattva’s career. *Avaivartika* as an epithet may be applied, not only to the eighth *bhūmi*, but also to the first *bhūmi*, the Pramuditā. This point of the first *bhūmi* is correlated with achieving the path of vision (*darśanamārga*) of the bodhisattva, whereby the bodhisattva enters into the certainty of attaining full awakening in the future (*avakrāntabod-*

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3) Sanskrit is from Senart, *Le Mahāvastu* (Paris: Société Asiatique), vol 1, page 63; English translation based on Jones, *The Mahāvastu* (London: Luzac), 1949: 52. See also Helmut Eimer, *Buddhistische Begriffsreihen als Skizzen des Erlösungsweges*. Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, H. 65. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Univ., 2006: 95–105.

4) The following summary of Lamotte is based on *Le traité* (vol 1, 24, 24n2, 242, 243, 426, 576; vol 2., 71 n1, vol 3. 1188n2, 1196, 1502n1, vol. 4 1790, 1790n4, 1800, 1804, 1804n2, 1805, 1806, 1807, 1862, 1899, 1920n1, 1922, 1939, 1940, vol. 5, 2238, 2268, 2344, 2381, 2414, 2440; *Śūrangamasamādhisūtra* (1998: 109n5, 185n209), *Vimalakīrtinīrdeśa* (1976: 61, 141, 222, 265, 291)

*hisattvaniyāma*).

Lamotte explains from a passage in the *Dazhidulun* that “from the first arousal of the thought of bodhi, the bodhisattva is *avaivartika*, but he is not endowed with the characteristics of *avaivartika*.” Based on this passage Lamotte describes two kinds of *avaivartika*: (1.) an *avaivartika* incorrectly so called, from the time of entering the *bhūmis*; (2.) an *avaivartika* correctly so called, starting with the eighth *bhūmi*. The distinction between these two, according to Lamotte, is only determined by the context of its occurrence. Lamotte will describe the correct or true form of *avaivartika* in terms of the bodhisattva attaining types of certainty or *niyāma* as set forth by the *Dazhidulun* and correlated to a variety of Mahāyāna sūtras and śāstras.

According to Lamotte, the bodhisattva *niyāma* is characterized by definitive attainment (*pratīlambatā*) of the conviction that dharmas do not arise (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*), a conviction mentioned in the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā* (p. 58.9) that regards dharmas as being selfless and birthless (*nirātmakeṣu anutpattikeṣu dharmeṣu kṣāntih*). Lamotte notes that a number of texts place this final conviction in the eighth *bhūmi*, the *Acalā* (*Daśabhūmika*, *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, *Madhyāntavibhāga*, *Bodhisattvabhūmi*). A bodhisattva who achieves this *kṣānti* is granted a great prediction (*mahāvvyākaraṇa*) (*Lalitavistara*, *Daśabhūmika*, *Saddharmapuṇḍarika*, *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, *Madhyāntavibhāga*). At this point a bodhisattva gains assurance of future buddhahood (*Madhyāntavibhāga*, p. 190.20: *niyatīpatito bhavati buddhatve*; *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra* p. 83.24: *niyato bhavaty anuttarāyāṃ samyak-sambodhau*; *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, p. 367.12: *ṭṭīyaniyatīpātāpatito bhavati*). According to Lamotte, at this point, a bodhisattva is without regression (*avaivartika*) and gains irreversible conviction (*Saddharmapuṇḍarika*, p. 259.13: *avaivartikakṣāntīpratīlabdha*). The eighth *bhūmi* generally known as *Acalā* is also called *Niyatabhūmi*, ‘determined level’ (*Bodhisattvabhūmi*, p. 367.11), *Avivartyabhūmi*, *Avivartaniyabhūmi*, *Avaiivartikabhūmi*, ‘Irreversible level’ (*Daśabhūmika*, p. 71.12; *Mahāyānasūtrālaṃkāra*, p. 176.22; *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, p. 235.18). This stage, according to Lamotte, marks the beginning of the irreversible career (*avaivartacaryā*, *avivartanacaryā*) toward Buddhahood that a bodhisattva will seek in the last three *bhūmis* (cf. *Mahāvastu*, I, p. 1. 3;

63. 13–14; *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, p. 290, l. 21).

I have previously discussed the *avaivartika bodhisattva* in relation to Indian and Tibetan scholastic understandings of the classification based on commentarial exegesis of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*.<sup>5</sup> In brief, in this genre of commentary members of the *saṃgha* jewel are understood to be the “irreversible community” (*avaivartika saṃgha*). This type of *saṃgha* is mentioned in the Indian commentaries of Ārya Vimuktisena and Haribhadra before articulating the characteristic of the *saṃgha* jewel in general and enumerating the divisions within the *saṃgha* jewel in particular (AAV, 39. AA, 32. 28. AASph (Amano 2000: 13)). Commenting on a later chapter in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*, Haribhadra in his *Ālokā* (665. 5–8.) distinguishes three types of irreversible *bodhisattvas*: (1) those who abide on the path of preparation [while cultivating] the preparatory analytical factors (*nirvedhabhāgīyaprayogamārgastha*), (2) those who abide on the path of seeing consisting of [eight moments of] receptivity and [eight moments of] knowledge (*kṣāntijñānasamgrhītadarśanamārgastha*), and (3) those who abide on the path of cultivation which follows (*prābandhikabhāvanāmārgastha*). These divisions are likewise characterized in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* itself and correlated to sections of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*.

My analysis and Lamotte’s basically has consisted of a presentation of the materials from an indigenous commentarial perspective on the attainment of *avaivartika* status. In the following sections I would like to analyze this topic from what I think is an earlier layer of Mahāyāna Buddhist discourse concerning the term *avaivartika* as well as its relation with the term *avaivartikacakra*, ‘the discourse on irreversibility.’

### **Avaivartika and Avaivartikacakra in Māhāyāna sūtra discourse**

As previously mentioned, *avaivartika* and its Indic equivalents are found in a great number of texts that become classified as Mahāyāna

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5) See Apple, *Stairway to Nirvāna: A Study of the Twenty Saṃghas based on the works of Tsong-kha-pa* (State University of New York Press, 2008), pp. 63–66, 93–98, 150–153, 171–180 and James Apple, “An Assembly of Irreversible Bodhisattvas. Twenty Varieties of the Saṃgha: A Typology of Noble Beings (Ārya) in Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism (Part 2).” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32: 211–279, 2004.

sūtras. In order to acquire an early sense of how the term is utilized in Mahāyāna discourse a good place to start is with the occurrence of this term among the works translated into Chinese during the beginning centuries of the common era. Chinese translations provide the *terminus ad quem* (“latest limiting point”) for when a text existed in India, but as Nattier (2003: 41) notes, “This does not tell us, of course, about the actual date of its composition; it merely points to the date prior to which the scripture must have come into existence.”

With this caveat in mind, we can briefly survey the use of *avaivartika* among early Chinese translators. As mentioned above *avaivartika* or its Indic equivalents are transliterated by Chinese translators as 阿惟越致 *a wei yue zhi* or translated into Chinese as 不退 *bu tui* “non-regression”. This choice of transliterating or translating *avaivartika* or its Indic equivalents goes back to the Indo-Scythian translator Zhiloujiachen 支婁迦讖 whose name is usually Sanskritized as Lokakṣema.

Lokakṣema transliterates the occurrence of *avaivartika* using 阿惟越致 in the vast majority of instances in his translated works. Among the ten sūtras currently attributed to Lokakṣema the term 阿惟越致 appears an estimated 135 times while the translated term 不退 occurs only 5 times.<sup>6)</sup> Further research will determine why Lokakṣema makes this choice but a reasonable hypothesis is that *avaivartika* is a polysemous term that is best left untranslated due to its multiple and variant meanings.

Among the works of the Lokakṣema translation corpus, the greatest occurrence of the term 阿惟越致 is found in the *Daoxing (banruo) jing*,

6) The estimate for the occurrence of these terms in Lokakṣema’s works is as follows based on a CBETA digital search: T224 *Daoxing (banruo) jing* (Sūtra on the Practice of the Way) [阿惟越致 96 times], T280 (*Fo shuo*) *dousha jing* (Dousha Sūtra) [no occurrences], T313 *Achu fo guo jing* (Sūtra on the Buddhaland of Akṣobhya) [阿惟越致 14 times, 不退 2 times], T418 *Banzhou sanmei jing* (Sūtra of the Pratyutpanna Samādhi) [阿惟越致 5 times, 不退 3 times], T458 *Wenshushili wen pusa shu jing* [阿惟越致 3 times], T350 *Yiri moni bao jing* [Skt. Kāśyapaparivarta sūtra], T626 *Azheshi wang jin* (Sūtra of King Ajātaśatru) [阿惟越致 10 times], T807 (*Fo shuo*) *neizang bai bao jing* (Sūtra of One Hundred Jewels of the Inner Treasury Preached by the Buddha) [no occurrences], T624 *Chunzhentuoluo suowen rulai sanmei jing* (*Drumakinnararājaparīṣcchā (sūtra)*) [阿惟越致 5 times], T283 *Pusa shizhu xingdao pin* [阿惟越致 2 times].

where the term appears 96 times. This may not be that surprising as the most abundant normative discussion of *avaivartika* found in Mahāyāna sūtras occurs in the Perfection of Wisdom literature. As the topic of *avaivartika* in the Perfection of Wisdom has been examined by the previous work of Conze (1975, 1990) (mainly in Nepalese based Sanskrit material) and Lethcoe (1971) (analysis of Kumārajīva's translation of the Aṣṭa), I will only provide a general overview of the concept in this genre of literature that contributes to our analysis in this paper. The discussion of *avaivartika* and its relation to bodhisattvas occurs throughout the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, and other *prajñāpāramitā sūtras*.

The earliest extant version of the Perfection of Wisdom sūtra is the second-century Chinese translation of Lokakṣema, the *Daoxing jing*. This text may provide evidence for how early authorial communities constructed the bodhisattva path and thought about the practices, doctrines, and goals of bodhisattva movements.

Among such doctrines and goals, the *Daoxing jing* provides brief descriptions of different kinds of bodhisattvas and their characteristics that are organized in a hierarchical, though rudimentary, manner. The *Daoxing jing* lacks a lengthy categorization of bodhisattvas and does not know of any *bhūmi*-based systemized structure of the bodhisattva path. When the term *bhūmi* does occur in the *Daoxing jing* it marks a status difference between bodhisattvas apart from śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas (Nattier 2003; Fronsdal 1998). Fronsdal's analysis (1998: 233–248) indicates that among the vague, brief, and ambiguous discussion of types of bodhisattvas in the *Daoxing jing* there are three kinds that are most dominant. These are the new (*xinxue*) bodhisattva, the *adhibhū* bodhisattva, and the irreversible bodhisattva.

Fronsdal's research indicates that the irreversible bodhisattva is most prevalent type of bodhisattva in the *Daoxing jing*. A lengthy exposition of the irreversible bodhisattva is found in Chapter 15 (Chapter 17 in Sanskrit) of the text. Irreversible bodhisattvas, as presented in the *Daoxing jing*, have cognitive levels of understanding equal to arhats (T 224: 430z16–18; 450b14–17; 454b17–18). They will never be reborn as women (T 224: 458a 18–19) nor in places of suffering (T 224: 454b27). They practice, even in dreams, the path of ten wholesome actions (T



224: 454b1), but do not make offerings to gods (454b26–27) nor take delight in donations (T 224: 454c15). The irreversible bodhisattva of the *Daoxing jing* practices the four dhyānas (455c13) and focuses on the truth (454c7). They proclaim the Perfection of Wisdom (461c26–28) and teach others to maintain the ten precepts (454c1–2).

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

The three separate prediction stories that occur in the *Daoxing jing* (T 224: 458a10–27; 468a29-b13; 477b11–18) mark a radical change in the career of Buddhas-to-be. They will never again be reborn as women and will always be reborn in the presence of Buddhas. As Fronsdal (1998: 259) notes, "Prediction thus brings irreversibility to the course of the bodhisattva, as he will never revert or fall back to unfortunate, or less than optimum, states of birth." Becoming an irreversible bodhisattva becomes synonymous with receiving a prediction to Buddhahood prior to chapter 19 in the *Daoxing jing* (Fronsdal 1998: 245; Shichi 1990: 44). The important relation between prediction and irreversibility is aptly indicated by Fronsdal (1998: 267) who points out that:

"For the early Perfection of Wisdom community a key issue was not whether one should decide to pursue the Bodhisattva path; rather it was whether or not one had already entered the Bodhisattva path by virtue of having received a prediction in the distant past, many lifetimes ago. It is likely that the extensive discussion in the *Daoxing jing* of how an irre-

versible bodhisattva is recognized is an expression of a need to verify people's status as predicted."

In sum, the discussion in the *Daoxing jing* of irreversible bodhisattvas centers around the theme of prediction and recognizable characteristics and signs that may indicate receiving a prediction. This text does not place the status of irreversibility within a systemized structure of hierarchical bodhisattva stages. Rather, the categorization of various bodhisattvas into irreversible status in the *Daoxing jing* hinges on whether or not one has received a prediction. This mode of categorization indicates that the authorial communities of the Perfection of Wisdom as represented by the *Daoxing jing* were patterning their construction of the bodhisattva path along the lines of structures found in Jātakas ("birth-stories") and Avadānas ("miraculous tales") of the life of Śākyamuni Buddha who had received a prediction from the Buddha Dīpaṃkara in his previous lives.

Lokakṣema's translation of the *Pratyutpanna samādhi sūtra*, the *Banzhou-sanmei-jing* (Taishō vol 13, no. 418), was translated in the same year (179 c.e.) as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. Both texts are therefore regarded by Paul Harrison as the oldest documentary evidence relating to early bodhisattva authorial communities whose works subsequently become classified as "Mahāyāna." The *Banzhou-sanmei-jing* contains several passages related to non-regression (*avivati* (= *avivarti*, *avivartika*)) that conform to the usage related to prediction found in the *Daoxing jing*.

These passages include a prediction vignette related to three men entrusted with the sūtra (Harrison 1998: 19, T. 418, 905b). An episode where a man awakens from a dream and realizes emptiness. A segment where the Buddha notes that the man then "attained happiness in dharmas which do not come into existence from anywhere, and straightaway attained non-regression" (Harrison 1998: 20). A passage indicating that bodhisattvas, due to the merit of serving a hundred Buddhas in previous lifetimes, will copy, study, recite, and uphold the volumes of the sūtra and attain non-regression (Harrison 1998: 30, T. 418, 907c). A segment that equates fully awakened Buddhas, bodhisattvas who do not regress, and Arhats to those who will believe in the *Pratyutpanna samādhi* (Harrison 1998: 67, T 418, 914a11). Another that

equates the manners in which Buddhas, bodhisattvas who do not regress, as well as Arhats and pratyekabuddhas, see dharmas as empty space (Harrison 1998: 78, T 418, 916a). An episode where only the Buddha, Śāriputra, and non-regressing bodhisattvas are able to calculate the distance a man walks without stopping for a hundred years (Harrison 1998: 90, T. 418, 917b–c).

Similar to the *Daoxing jing*, the *Banzhou-sanmei-jing* lacks a clearly articulated structure of *bhūmis*. However, one passage does present a list of attainments based on hearing the *sūtra*. The passage is as follows:

The Buddha said: “Just now, as I have been preaching this meditation, eighteen hundred million gods, Asura spirits, dragons, and human beings have all attained the Way of the stream-enterer, eight hundred monks have all attained the Way of the arhat, five hundred nuns have all attained the Way of the arhat, ten thousand bodhisattvas have all mastered this meditation, and have all attained happiness in dharmas which are not produced from anywhere and have established themselves in it; and twelve thousand bodhisattvas will never regress (Harrison 1998: 103, T. 418, 919b6).”<sup>7)</sup>

The stages of attainment mentioned in this passage start with Stream-enterer to Arhat and culminate with the non-regressing (*avaivartika*) bodhisattva. Avaivartika bodhisattvas have great status for the authors and audience of this *sūtra* but there is not a clear structuralized *bhūmi* system in place.

### **Avaivartika and Avaivartikacakra in the Lotus sūtra**

The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (*Lotus sūtra*) contains several passages related to irreversible bodhisattvas, but similar to other *sūtras* found in the Lokakṣema corpus, such as the early Perfection of Wisdom, the *Pratyutpanna samādhi sūtra*, and so forth, there is not a systemized hierarchical structure of bodhisattva stages. Rather, like other early to middle period bodhisattva *sūtras*, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* compares the cognitive knowledge of irreversible bodhisattvas to arhats and pratyek-

7) Harrison 1998: 103; Taishō. 418, 919b18b227.

abuddhas, grants the status of irreversible to those who accept the sūtra, or marks this status in relation to prediction episodes.

If we accept the hypothesis that the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* was gradually composed through a process of four stages as proposed by Karashima and Kajiyama,<sup>8)</sup> then even the earliest formative layers mention the irreversible bodhisattva because a number of citations are found within the first two stages of development. The earliest occurrences of the term are found in Chapters Two and Three. In Chapter Two (2.17) the irreversible bodhisattva comes at the end of a list of beings who are unable to cognize *buddhajñāna*. The list begins with *adhimukti* bodhisattvas (2.7), arhats (2.8), beings like Śārisuta (2.9), Pratyekabuddhas (2.12), newly set out bodhisattvas (*navayānasamprasthita bodhisattvāḥ*) (2.14), and then irreversible or non-regressing bodhisattvas (*avivartikā*) (2.17).<sup>9)</sup> Similar to the *Daoxing jing*, this early portion of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* implicitly differentiates three types of bodhisattvas in these verses: *adhimukti* bodhisattvas, newly set out bodhisattvas, and irreversible bodhisattvas.

In Chapter Three (3.90) the *avivartika* bodhisattva is listed with Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas who will receive, if they follow the Lotus sūtra, the single Buddha-vehicle.<sup>10)</sup> Another set of verses in Chapter Three, similar to statements in the *Pratyutpanna samādhi sūtra*, presupposes that followers of the *Lotus sūtra* must have served previous Buddhas in previous lifetimes and that if they have utmost faith in the *Lotus sūtra* they will be considered to be *avivartika* bodhisattvas (3.106–107).<sup>11)</sup>

Chapter Five of the *Lotus sūtra* on Plants (*oṣadhī*) may contain the earliest extant Indic language reference to *avivartikacakra* found in

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8) This theory is proposed in Karashima (1991, 1993, 2001) and Kajiyama (2000) and the four stages of formation are as follows: (1) Triṣṭubh-Jagatī verses, found in chapters from the Upāyakaūśālya- (II) to the Vyākaraṇa-parivarta (IX); (2) Śloka verse and prose, found in those chapters; (3) Chapters from the Dharmabhāṇaka-(X) to the Tathāgataṛddhyabhisamṣkāraparivarta (XX), as well as Nidāna-(I) and Anuparīdanā-parivarta (XXVII); (4) The other chapters (XXI–XXVI) and the latter half of the Stūpasamdarśanaparivarta (XI), i.e. the so-called *Devadatta-parivarta*.

9) *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* 2.7–2.18 (Kern/N 31.5–32.14).

10) *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* 3.90 (KN 90.7-8); Burnouf 1925:57 at 3.84.

11) *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* 3.106-107 (KN 93.1–5); Kern: 106; Burnouf 1925: 59 at 3.100.

Mahāyāna sūtras. In a series of verses in this chapter the Buddha tells the parable of plants which despite receiving water emitted by one and the same cloud, grow into plants of different sizes, some being low, others being midsized, and some being great. Small plants are equated by analogy with Arhats (5.29), middle size plants are equated with Pratyekbuddhas (5.30), highest plants are those who aspire to Buddhahood (5.31), those who arrive at certainty at being leaders are called trees (5.32), and great trees are those who “turn the irreversible wheel” (*avivartikakra*) (5.33).<sup>12)</sup>

The occurrences of *avaivartika* in the *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka* are also related to predictions. This is most evident in the early layers of the *sūtra* in the sixth chapter on prediction (*vyākaraṇa*). In the Buddha’s prediction of Subhūti to one day become a Buddha, Subhūti’s future Buddhahood is described as containing many bodhisattvas who “turn the wheel that never rolls back” (6.21).<sup>13)</sup> Likewise, the prediction of Mahāmaudgalyāyana to become one day the Buddha Tamālapatrakandanagandha mentions that this Buddha will have numerous Arhats among his disciples and, in addition, there will appear numerous *avaivartika* bodhisattvas (6.36–37).<sup>14)</sup>

As this brief survey indicates, the early stage sections of the *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka* discuss *avaivartika* in a manner congruent with other early to middle period bodhisattva discourses. Occurrences of *avaivartika* within Karashima and Kajiyama’s theoretical stage three (that is, *Dharmabhāṅga*-(X) to the *Tathāgatarddhyabhisaṃskāraparivarta* (XX), as well as *Nidāna*-(I) and *Anuparīdanā-parivarta* (XXVII)) are also very similar to occurrences in early stages. In chapter 11 of the Sanskrit (Chapter 12 in Kumārajīva), Śāriputra, voicing a mainstream Buddhist view, tells the daughter of the Nāga king that even though she has conceived of the spirit of awakening that will not turn back the bodhisattva path is impossible for a women. This is because women, according to Śāriputra, are unable to attain the status of (1) Brahma, (2.) Indra,

12) *Saddharmapūṇḍarīka* 5.28-33 oṣadhiparivartah (KN 129.7–130.4); 1) KN, p. 130n2 *avaivartya* Cb, *avivartikam cakram* O.

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

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

(3.) chief guardian of the four quarters, (4.) a cakravartin king or the status of (5.) an irreversible bodhisattva.<sup>15)</sup> In Kumārajīva's translation the fifth status is not *avaivartika* but that of a Buddha (Kubo and Yuyama 2007: 184). In addition to Śāriputra's misogynistic tendencies indicated in this passage, the segment illustrates the great status *avaivartika* bodhisattvas had at this stage of the *Saddharmaṣūdarīka*'s development. Chapter 12 in the Sanskrit mentions the Buddha looking toward eighty hundred thousand Bodhisattvas who attained the use of *dhāraṇī* and who "turned the wheel of irreversible dharma" (*bhagavān yena tānyasītibodhisattvakoṭīnayutaśatasahasrāṇī dhāraṇīpratilabdhanām bodhisattvānām avaivartikadharmacakra pravartakānām tenāvalokayāmāsa*). Chapter 13 verse 64 in the Sanskrit (Kumārajīva Chapter 14, T. 262, 39b) also mentions the attainment of *dhāraṇī* with "irreversible" qualities when the Buddha speaks of those who uphold the *Lotus sūtra* and "attain the power of recollection and the knowledge of non-regression."<sup>16)</sup>

The only occurrence of *avaivartika* in relation to *bhūmi* in the *Saddharmaṣūdarīka* appears in the Duration of the Tathāgata's Lifespan Chapter (Chapter 15 Sanskrit, Chapter 16 Kumārajīva, T. 262, 42b) where the bodhisattva-māhasattva Maitreya along with a great

15) Lamotte notes in the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra* (volume 1, page 123) that women encounter five hindrances (*āvaraṇa*): "they cannot become cakravartin king, or Śakradevarāja, or Māradevarāja, a Brahmādevārāja, or Buddha." Lamotte notes the source of these in mainstream Buddhism as: *Majjhima*, III, p. 65–66 (missing in *Zhong ahan*, T 26, k. 47, p. 723; *Anguttara*, I, p. 28; *Vibhaṅga*, p. 336; *Nettipakaraṇa*, P. 93: "It is impossible that in the present and the future a woman should become a perfectly enlightened arhat (= the Buddha), a cakravartin king, Śakra, Māra or Brahmā. That does not happen." (aṭṭhānam etaṃ anavakāso.... n'etaṃ thānaṃ vijjati). Thus there are five impossibilities for a woman: she cannot be Buddha or cakravartin or Śakra (Indra) or Māra or Brahmā. The *Saddharmaṣūdarīkā*, p. 264, retains this rule, but modifies its formulation slightly: *Pañca sthānāni sry adyāpi... pāncamam avaivartikabodhisattvasthanam*. There are exceptions to the rule: thus it is known, p. 263, that the daughter of Sāgara, king of the nāgas "is capable of reaching the state of fully accomplished Buddhahood" (*sā samyaksambodhim abhisambodhim samarthā*).

16) *Saddharmaṣūdarīka* 13.64 (KN 294.7–8): *so ca prahr̥ṣṭo bhavati śrūṇitvā prāmodyajātaśca karoti pūjām/supine ca so dhāraṇī prāpnoti avivartiyam jñāna spr̥ṣitva kṣīpram//13.64//Karashima (2005: 131) notes several interesting variants on this verse, XIII § 24, (Gilgit) *avivartiyam jñāna spr̥ṣisyase* (p. 131), (Khādalīq) *avivartikaṃ jñāna spr̥ṣitva* (p. 132), (F) *avivartokaṃ jñāna [s]pr̥ṣitva* (p. 134).*

number of bodhisattvas explain to the Buddha that they are incapable of comprehending an analogy given for length of the Buddha's lifespan, even while standing on the ground of no turning back, or alternatively, "abiding on the stage of non-regression."<sup>17</sup>

This passage indicates that the stage of non-regression is attained by high level bodhisattva mahāsattvas like Maitreya. But the context does not indicate what the intended audience knew of this stage other than the ostensive meaning that non-regression marks a point in the career of a bodhisattva that, once reached, indicates that there can be no turning back from the achievement of Buddhahood. Similar to other early to mid-level sūtras, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* does not know of an organized sequence of *bhūmis*. The term *bhūmi* occurs around 36 times in the *Lotus sūtra* (See Ejima et al, 1985: 781), usually in compounds beginning with *arhat-*, *śrāvaka-*, *pratyekabuddha-*, *bodhisattva-*, *śaikṣa-*, and *avaivartya-*. But an organized sequence of *bhūmis* does not belong to this stage of Mahāyāna sūtra, or perhaps more prudently, such an organized sequence does not belong to the strand of bodhisattva literature followed by the authorial community of the *Lotus sūtra*.

Nevertheless, a sequence of hierarchical attainment related to non-regression is found in the *Lotus sūtra* (Chapter 16 Sankrit, Chapter 17 Kumārajīva). The sequence occurs, as we have seen in other sūtras, in the context of the benefits of hearing a sūtra or a particular point of teaching within a sūtra. In this case the sequence of attainment is addressed to Maitreya after the exposition on the Tathāgata's lifespan. The sequence of attainments is mostly achieved by bodhisattva mahāsattvas (except the first by only bodhisattvas) and occurs in the following order: acquisition of the certainty that dharmas do not arise (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*), the acquisition of recollection (*dhāraṇī*), acquisition of *dhāraṇī* that makes hundred thousand koṭis of revolution (*koṭīnāyutaśatasahasraparivartāyā dhāraṇyāḥ*), turning the wheel of irreversible dharma (*avaivartyadharmacakram pravartayāmāsuḥ*), turning the wheel of spotless radiance (*vimalanirbhāsacakram pravartayāmāsuḥ*), acquiring perfect awakening after eight rebirths (*aṣṭajāti [prati]baddhā*), after only four rebirths (*caturjātipratibaddhā*), after only

17) *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* 15, tathāgatāyuspramāṇaparivartah (KN 316.12–317.4).

three rebirths (*trijātipratibaddhā*), two rebirths (*dvijātipratibaddhaḥ*), after only one rebirth (*ekajātipratibaddaḥ*).

The sequence seems to move from lower attainments to stages of attainment with greater prestige. The classification *ekajātipratibaddha* indicating “having only one life remaining before Buddhahood” is often attributed to Maitreya and develops into a classification applied to 10<sup>th</sup> stage bodhisattvas. Here we note that in this section of the Lotus sūtra turning the “wheel of spotless radiance” (*vimalanirbhāsacakra*) seems to have greater status than the “wheel of irreversible dharma” (*avaivartyadharmacakra*). It is not clear what these two “wheels” are referring to, whether they mark bodhisattvas’ teaching abilities or meditative abilities or are a references to discourses that bodhisattvas have mastered. As we will see, the term *avaivartacakra*, as well as *avaivartyadharmacakra*, have multiple meanings such that it is difficult to tell exactly what status or quality these bodhisattvas have attained in this passage.

There are two other occurrences of *avaivarta* related terms in the *Lotus sūtra*. I will discuss the term *avivartya* in Chapter 13 of the Lotus sūtra in a later section. The other related appearance is in the *nidāna* section of the Lotus sūtra where after listing the qualities of the Arhats the sūtra provides an opening discription of 80,000 bodhisattvas who were, as translated by Kern from the Sanskrit:

“all unable to slide back,[having one lifetime before Awakening,] endowed with the spells of supreme, perfect enlightenment, firmly standing in wisdom; who moved onward the never deviating wheel of the law.”<sup>18)</sup>

Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation as represented by Kubo and Yuyama (2007:3) is as follows:

“There were also eighty thousand bodhisattva mahāsattvas, all of whom were irreversible from highest, complete enlightenment (anuttarā

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18) Material in brackets added. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka, nidānaparivartaḥ* (KN 2.10–3.3).



samyak- sambodhi). They had obtained the dhāraṇīs, were established in eloquence, and had turned the irreversible wheel of the Dharma.”<sup>19)</sup>

Both versions make a distinction between *avaivartika* and *avaivartyadharmacakra* as different qualities of bodhisattva mahāsattvas. The compound *avaivartyadharmacakra* or *avaivartikadharmacakra* occurs in the nidānas of several Mahāyāna sūtras such as the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*,<sup>20)</sup> the *Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra*, the *Sarvabuddhaviṣayāvātāra-jñānālokālaṃkāra*,<sup>21)</sup> the *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*,<sup>22)</sup> and the *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa*.<sup>23)</sup> A further search of *nidāna* sections among extant Mahāyāna sūtras will most likely indicate more instances of this epithet for bodhisattva mahāsattvas. Modern translators have rendered the compound in several ways, “la roue de la loi qui ne peut revenir en arrière” (Burnouf 1925: 2), “the never deviating wheel of the law” (Kern), “la roue de la Loi sans recul/irreversible wheel of the Dharma” (Lamotte 1965: 227/1998: 199, 200), “cycle irrévocable” (Demiéville 1973), “irreversible wheel of the Dharma” (Thurman 1976), “the wheel of religion never turning back [from the incomparable awakening (anut-

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- 19) T. 262, 2a2-a4: 菩薩摩訶薩八萬人 皆於阿耨多羅三藐三菩提不退轉 皆得陀羅尼 樂說辯才 轉不退轉法輪
- 20) *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, Vkn MS 1b3–MS 1b6, §3, *avaivartikadharmacakraṣvarvarttakaiḥ*/Zhiqian 支謙 (黃武, Huangwu, A.D. 223–228), 佛說維摩詰經, *Weimojie Jing*, T 474 519a10: 阿惟越致法輪已轉 (*a wei yue zhi falun yi zhuan*); Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (後秦, Hòu Qín, A.D. 406.), 維摩詰所說經, *Weimojie Suoshuo Jing*, Chinese translation of Vkn, in T, text no. 475.) Vkn T 475 537a8: 已能隨順轉不退輪 (*yi neng sui shun zhuan bu tui lun*); Xuanzang 玄奘 (唐, Táng, A.D. 650), 說無垢稱經, *Shuo Wugoucheng Jing*, Chinese translation of Vkn, in T, text no. 476.), Vkn T 476 557c9: 已能隨轉不退法輪 (*yi neng sui zhuan bu tui falun*); Tib. *phyir mi ldog pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo skor ba*/Chos nyid tshul khriṃs (8th Century A.D.?), *Phags pa Dri med grags pas bstan pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*, (Tibetan translation of Vkn), in Derge bKa' 'gyur, mdo sde, vol. ma, pp. 175a1–239b7.
- 21) In Kimura et al (2004): §1 Ms. 1b1–2a1, P. 301b6–302b1, D. 276a1–276b1, T. 357 239a5–239a26, T. 358 250a14–250b4, T. 359(D) 253c20–254a14: *bodhisattvena mahāsattvena/sarvair avaiartikadharmacakraṣvarvarttakaiḥ*
- 22) *Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, Zimmermann, 2002, section 0D: Tgs T 666 457, 不退法輪, T 667 460, 不退法輪; Tib Tgs Bth—Bth, *phyir mi ldog pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo bskor ba sa stag go*, Tgs Tib Kg Zimmermann, *phyir mi ldog pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo rab tu bskor pa*.
- 23) *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa* (Braarvig 1993: 18–19): *phyir mi ldog pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo, avaiartikadharmacakram*.

tarabodhi)]” (Braarvig 1993), “the non-retrogressing Wheel (of the Dharma) (Karashima 1998), “accord with [the truth] in turning the irreversible wheel [of the Dharma]” (McRae 2004), “irreversible wheel of the dharma” (Kubo and Yuyama 2007), “wheel of irreversible doctrine” (Apple 2008), and “the wheel of the Dharma [which] never regresses” (Zimmermann 2002: 96). But as Zimmermann (2002: 96n15) notes regarding this compound, “Its interpretation, however, is not at all clear. Does *avaivartya* refer to *dharma*, to *cakra*, or to both of them? Or should we assume a “wheel of the Dharma for the *avaivartyas*,” or even a “wheel of the Dharma by which one becomes *avaivartya*”?”

The Tibetan translation of the compound always occurs as *phyir mi ldog pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo* which does not provide a definite way to understand the compound. A commentary on the *Akṣayamatīnirdeśa sūtra* states that “the *avaivartyadharmacakra* is called as such since the sūtra indicates the method for being irreversible from unsurpassable awakening” (Braarvig 1993: 18–19: *phyir mi ldog pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo zhes bya ba ni bla na med pa'i byang chub las phyir mi ldog pa'i thabs mdo sde 'di las ston pa'i phyir ro*).

The compound *avaivartyadharmacakra* or *avaivartikadharmacakra* (Cf. Kn 2.11, 2n13; Vkn ms §1.3) may be an expanded form of *avaivartacakra* (or *avivartacakra*), or perhaps, *avaivartacakra* is a contracted form of *avaivartyadharmacakra*. This is how Edgerton (1953: 78b) understands the occurrence of *avivartya-(dharma)-cakra* given above in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (6.21; Kn 149.13). The *Avaivartacakra mahāyāna sūtra* provides the compound *\*avaivartacakradharma* (*phyir mi ldog pa'i 'khor lo'i chos*, mdo sde, zha 248a2, 248a4, 248a6, 299a7) which it seems to give as synonymous with *\*avaivartadharmacakra* (*phyir mi ldog pa'i chos kyi 'khor lo*, mod sde zha 243a4).

The term *dharmacakra* is present from the earliest references in Buddhist discourse regarding the Buddha “turning the Wheel of the Doctrine” (*dharmacakrapravartana*). Recent scholarship (Dessein 2007) has analyzed early debates among Sarvāstivāda and Mahāsāṃghika Abhidharma understandings of “wheel of the doctrine.” The simile of a “wheel” may be a later addition to describing the Buddha’s first teaching (Dessein 2007: 26n53) as the simile is not present in a number of āgama/nikāya and vinaya passages. In any case, early Abhidharma com-

pillers refer to the wheel of the doctrine as a “brahmā-wheel” that is a quality of Buddha as *brahmā*, in the sense of calm (*sānta*) and appeasement (*śītībhūta*) and identify the wheel with the path of vision (*darśanamārga*). In brief, “Wheel” is equated with the teaching of the Buddha itself (*dharmaparyāya*) (Dessein 2007: 33) and “turning” implies that someone has cognized the word of the Buddha and proceeded on the path of liberation (Dessein 2007: 34). *Cakra* or *dharmacakra* may therefore signify a type of teaching or quality of teaching that the Buddha or a Buddha is trying to convey.

When we look for passages that may indicate how to understand the compound *avaivartacakra* as a type of *dharma* or *dharmacakra*, a good example is found in chapter 16 of the proto-Mahāyāna *Lalitavistara* on “setting the wheel of the doctrine in motion” (*dharmacakrapravaratanaparivartaḥ*). In a section of this chapter the Buddha explains to the *mahāsattva bodhisattva* Maitreya what is conveyed in setting the wheel in motion. In particular, there are number of epithets describing the “wheel” or teaching. Among the epithets given several are used by Edgerton in his dictionary: the wheel (*cakra*) or “wheel of the doctrine” (*dharmacakra*) that the Buddha teaches is “immovable, steadfast, steady” (*akoṣya-(dharma)-cakra*, LV 422.17, Edgerton 1953: 2), a “wheel that cannot be turned back because of (the Buddha’s) fixed determination to discipline creatures that are subject to bad births” (*akṣaṇasattva-vinayādhiṣṭhānāpratyudāvartyacakraṃ*, LV 423.5–6, Edgerton 1953: 15), a wheel that is “inexpressible, that cannot be put into words” (*anabhihīṣya-(dharma)-cakra*, LV 423.4, Edgerton 1953: 20), “without accumulation” (*anabhisamskāra-cakraṃ*, LV 422.21), “without attachment, without foundation” (*anālaya-cakraṃ*, LV 422.19, Edgerton 1953: 23), “free from strife” (*anāyūha-cakraṃ*, LV 423.4, Edgerton 1953: 23), “unobscured” (*anāvaraṇa (dharma)-cakra* (LV 423.2, Edgerton 1953: 23), “completely ungraspable” (*atyantānupalabdhicakraṃ*, LV 423. 4, Edgerton 1953:29), “aimless, free from desire” (*apraṇihita-cakraṃ*, LV 422.21, Edgerton 1953: 47), a “wheel of the comprehension of the equality of all substantial states as belonging to one sphere” (*ekaviṣaya-sarvadharma-samatāvatāra-cakraṃ* (LV 423.5; Edgerton 1953: 71), a wheel “neither annihilable nor eternal” (*anucchedamaśāśvatam (dharma)-cakra*, LV 423.10; Edgerton 1953: 80), and “a wheel which does not disturb the

true end (of perfect awakening)” (*bhūtakoty-avikopana-cakram*, LV 423.1; Edgerton 1953: 410).<sup>24</sup>

This passage, I think, illustrates that a term which occurs in a compound with *cakra* signifies a descriptive quality of *dharma*. Therefore, *avaivartacakra* or *avaivartadharmacakra* represents a “teaching on irreversibility” or “teaching on the irreversible doctrine.” In any case, as indicated in the following pages, the compound *avaivartacakra* does occur in several other Mahāyāna sūtras that provide additional understandings of the term.

Braarvig & Pagel (2006: 25) have indentified at least five occurrences of a discussion of *avaivartikacakra* (‘the wheel that does not roll back’ according to their translation) in Mahāyāna sūtras. These five are the *Upāyakaṣṣāyasūtra* (Dkon brtsegs, cha, 55v1–6; Mdo sde, za, 300v3–7), *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodana* (Mdo sde, tsha, 242v2–243v6), *Vimalakīrtinirdēśa*, *Drummakinnararājaparipṛcchā* (DKP: §1D, p.9.4–5, §5E, 97.10; Mdo sde, pha, 255r5–6, 275r3–5, *Pūrṇaparipṛcchā* (Dkon brtsegs, nga, 205v7–207r7) and the *Maitreyaprasthāna* (Mdo sde, tsa, 278a1–279b1). It is important to note here, as far as I can tell, that the compound *avaivartikacakra* and its variants does not occur in the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras, at least not the Sanskrit versions of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* or the *Pañcaviṃśatiprajñāpāramitā*.

The *Pūrṇaparipṛcchā* indicates that the *avaivarticakra* is a sūtra of the *bodhisattvapiṭaka* and is taught in the bamboo grove in Rājāgrha as opposed to the grove at Vārāṇasī where the dharma is taught to śrāvakas.<sup>25</sup> The *Maitreyaprasthāna* occurs only in Tibetan and provides the following description of the *avaivartikacakra*:

“Each assembly (of that buddhfield) contains twelve million bodhisattvas. But in the last one, an infinite incalculable number of bodhisattvas of the Blessed One will come together. The Tathāgata, Arhant, Samyaksambuddha [of that buddhfield] who is called \*Suvarṇasuprabha (*gser bzangs ’od*) teaches nothing but the dharma. He teaches only the

24) The full passage contains numerous other examples. The passage is in *Lalitavistara*, *dharmacakrapravartanaparivartaḥ* (chapter 26, Lefman 422:7–423.15).

25) *Pūrṇaparipṛcchā* (Dkon brtsegs, nga, 207b1).

Bodhisattvapiṭaka [which is] a ‘teaching on irreversibility’ (*avaivartikacakra*). What is the dharma discourse of the Bodhisattvapiṭaka [which is] a ‘teaching on irreversibility’? It is a teaching (*dharmā*) that does not turn back from thusness (*de bzhin nyid*), it is a teaching that does not turn back from the ‘realm of reality’ (*dharmadhātu*), it is a teaching that does not turn back from the limit of reality. Attachment does not turn back from the essence (*ngo bo nyid*) of attachment, aversion does not turn back from the essence of aversion, delusion does not turn back from the essence of delusion, form does not turn back from the essence of form, feeling, recognition, karmic forces, and consciousness do not turn back from the essence of feeling, etc. The eye does not turn back from the essence of the eye. The ear, nose, tongue, body and mind do not turn back from the essence of the ear, etc. That which is [their] essence lacks substantiality (*dn̄gos po med pa*) and that which lacks substantiality does not turn back from anything, it does not engage anywhere.<sup>26</sup> O son of good family, thus, in this buddhāfield, the Tathāgata, Arhant, Samyaksambuddha \*Suvarṇasuprabha instructs bodhisattvas in the dharma discourse of the Bodhisattvapiṭaka [which is] a ‘teaching on irreversibility’ (Mdo sde, tsa, 278a1–279b1).<sup>27</sup>

As Braarvig & Pagel note (2006: 25n14), the central part of this citation appears almost verbatim in the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodana* (Mdo sde, tsha, 242v2–243v6) demonstrating a relation or at least drawing upon similar sources. Pagel (2007: 79–81) has discussed and translated this passage from the *Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodana*, which is also briefly mentioned by Harrison & Hartmann (2000: 169). The passage occurs in a portion of the *sūtra* where Mañjuśrī addresses 500 bodhisattvas during a single night on three teachings addressing *dhāraṇī* (mdo sde, tsha, 238r7–240v4), *bodhisattvapiṭaka* (240v4–242v2), and the *avaivartikacakra*. The section on *avaivartikacakra* is an early source for

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26) Note here that the language of “turning back” reflects direct influence from the *Pañcaviṃśati*. See Takayasu Kimura: *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* IV (Tokyo : Sankibo Busshorin 1990), p. 142.

27) I have modified the translation given by Braarvig & Pagel (2006: 25). The Tibetan from Derge, Mdo sde, tsa, 278b21–279b1.

what the *vajrapada* of the ‘Wheel that does not roll back’ (*avaivartikacakra*) entails. An early version of the passage is found in Lokakṣema’s translation of the *sūtra*, the *Azheshi wang jing* 阿闍世王經<sup>28</sup>) (T. 626, 398b24–399a1). As the following passage may be the most complete description of what *avaivartacakra* entails, the passage is presented in its entirety from the Tibetan as follows:

Then, Mañjuśrī kumārabhūta, during the final watch of the night, explained at length to those [500] bodhisattvas the purpose of engaging in the *vajrapada* [known] as the “irreversible wheel” (*phyir mi ldog pa’i ’khor lo≈ avaiivartikacakra*): O Sons of Virtuous Families, when a bodhisattva explains to sentient beings the teaching known as the “irreversible wheel,” all those who listen to that elucidation will realize the true condition of being irreversible (*phyir mi ldog pa’i chos nyid*) and from the exposition of the irreversible wheel will not fall back again (*slar mi ldog pa*).

O Sons of Virtuous Families, the bodhisattva, mahāsattva who is devoted to the irreversible wheel does not course in the multiplicity of living beings, factors of existence, vehicles, Buddha-fields, or Buddhas but perceives the revolving cycle of all things as all-pervasive, even the wheel of dharma is inseparable from the realm of reality (dharmadhātu). In this way it is called an “irreversible wheel.” This wheel is a wheel that does not cease, a wheel without duality, a wheel that proclaims things as they are, a wheel which cognizes naturally occurring gnosis. This wheel is a wheel of the Dharmadhātumaṇḍala.

O Sons of Virtuous Families, the bodhisattva mahāsattva who aspires to this irreversible wheel, with all its distinguishing features, and cause others to yearn for it—they will all be liberated by means of the Tathāgata liberation as liberation is not ever indicated to be dual. The distinguishing feature of the Tathāgata’s liberation is also the distinguishing feature

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28) Among other differences, the passage is more extended than the Tibetan. I have noted the passage for future analysis, see *Azheshi wang jing* 阿闍世王經 (T. 626, 398b23–399a1).

of all things and the Tathāgata's liberation is without distinguishing feature. All things are disconnected from the distinguishing features of liberation as well and whichever thing which is without distinguishing feature is not at all liberated except for non-duality, the disconnection from mind and body that is liberation. Mind and body do not become liberated. Why is that? Because liberation is the nature of mind and body. In this way, because gnosis does not depend on anything it is called "the irreversible wheel."

O Sons of Virtuous Families, the irreversible wheel does not turn back. Why? Form does not turn back from the essence of form. Likewise feeling, conceptions, karmic formations, and consciousness do not turn back from their nature. O Sons of Virtuous Families, all things do not turn back from the realm of reality and because the realm of reality (*dharmadhātu*) is exactly how things are it is called "the wheel which does not turn back" This wheel does not enter into the middle, is unceasing, and not permanent. Since this wheel is without an entrance it is a wheel which is an entrance to non-duality. This wheel does not rotate since it lacks circular motion. Since this wheel does not indicate anything it is a wheel which does not proclaim anything. Since this wheel does not proclaim anything it is a wheel which is ineffable.

Further, since this wheel which does not turn back abides as an entrance to emptiness it is without distinguishing features. Since it stands as a doorway to liberation it is without distinguishing features. It has the distinguishing feature of all-pervasive space. And furthermore, has the distinguishing feature of completely permeating the nature of [all-pervasive space]. Such is the "irreversible wheel." (Mdo sde, tsha, 242v3-243v1).<sup>29)</sup>

This passage equates the *avaivartacakra* ("teaching on irreversibility") with reaching the state of being irreversible itself (*avaivartika*), as well equating *avaivarta* with the 'realm of reality' (*dharmadhātu*),

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29) A translation of this passage is also found in Pagel 2007: 79-81. Tibetan in Derge, Mdo sde, tsha, 242b3-243v1.

*madhātu*), all-pervasive space, non-duality, and emptiness. A passage from the *Lotus sūtra* which utilizes this understanding of *avaivarta* (*avivartya*) is found in the Sanskrit prose of Chapter 13 (although not the verses) and in both the prose and verses of Kumārajīva's Chapter 14. A translation from the Sanskrit is as follows:

Furthermore, Mañjuśrī, a bodhisattva mahāsattva sees all things as empty, he sees them as they are established in reality, remaining unaltered, just as they are, immovable, irreversible, unchangeable, in the definitive sense, having the nature of space, beyond explanation and expression of speech, unborn, unconditioned, aggregated and isolated, inexpressible, arising due to perversions of conception. In this manner, Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva mahāsattva constantly sees all things, and when staying in this course, the bodhisattva mahāsattva stands in the proper sphere. This, Mañjuśrī, is the second proper sphere of a bodhisattva.<sup>30)</sup>

The term *avaivarta* and its equivalents may be polysemous for an Indic based audience, signifying the more common understanding of not regressing or turning back from Buddhahood, but also irreversible in the sense of an all-pervasive quality of reality that is immutable, unborn, and non-dual—the stasis of the totality of ever-present Awakening.

### Concluding Remarks

The discussion within bodhisattva literature on non-regressing or

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30) *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* (KN 277.11–278.5); Tibetan from Peking (Q, mdo sde chu 120a1–); Kumārajīva T. 262, 37b11–b17; Kubo & Yuyama 2007: 194 “Furthermore, the bodhisattva mahāsattvas perceive the emptiness of all dharmas in their true aspect. All things are unerring, unmoving, nonreturning, irreversible, and like empty space which lacks substance. They are beyond all language. They are not produced, nor do they emerge, nor do they arise. They do not have any name or mark, and in reality they have no substance. They are immeasurable, limitless, without obstacles or obstructions. They exist only through dependent origination, arising through error. That is why I teach the permanent joy of perceiving the aspects of all existent things in this way. This is what is known as the second sphere of relationships of a bodhisattva mahāsattva.”



irreversible bodhisattvas (*avaivartika*) begins in the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras and develops among authorial communities of bodhisattva sūtras as a term of high status for bodhisattvas who have received a prediction for Buddhahood. The presence of the term *avaivartika* and its evocation of status among bodhisattva textual communities is more prevalent in the earlier historical layers of this literature as the Mahāyāna sūtra translations of Lokakṣema and Dharmarakṣa contain more instances of the term in some instances than the comparable Tibetan translations. The term *avaivartika* and its equivalents was polysemous for its Indic based audience, signifying the more common understanding of not regressing or turning back from Buddhahood, but also irreversible in the sense of an all-pervasive quality of reality that is immutable, unborn, and non-dual. As the prestige of the *avaivartika* classification spread among bodhisattva textual communities the qualities and characteristics of the *avaivartika* bodhisattva expanded as well. The term *avaivartika* developed into a “prestige quality” of bodhisattvas and was employed as an epithet for the various array of Mahāyāna expansive doctrinal characteristics and cognitions.

The compound *avaivartacakra* emerges and develops out of this discourse on the *avaivartika* to signify a high level teaching on ultimate reality for bodhisattvas to cognize while at the same time enabling bodhisattvas to become irreversible from the attainment of Buddhahood. The compound becomes incorporated into the introductory sections (*nidāna*) of bodhisattva sūtras to describe the preeminent qualities that high status, i.e. *mahāsattva*, bodhisattvas embody and is found within several Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the *Saddharmapundarīka* (*Lotus sūtra*), to indicate the type of discourse that such eminent bodhisattvas teach.

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## On *Avaivartika* and *Avaivartikacakra* in Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature with Special Reference to the Lotus Sūtra

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The concept of the irreversible (*avaivartika*) bodhisattva is considered to be one of the more intriguing subjects in the historical development of Mahāyāna Buddhism due to the concept's prevalence, yet obscure meaning, in many Mahāyāna sūtras. As a contribution toward understanding the subject of *avaivartika*, this paper investigates *avaivartika* (along with its equivalents) and *avaivartikacakra* in a select number of selfproclaimed Mahāyāna sūtras. The paper examines the development and formation of *avaivartika* as a status marking term in Mahāyāna sūtras and explains its rhetorical use among bodhisattva authorial communities. The paper then discusses the use of the term *avaivartikacakra* in Mahāyāna discourse. The "discourse on irreversibility" (*avaivartikacakra*) is mentioned in such sūtras as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, *Śūraṅgamasamādhi*, and *Vimalakīrti* among others. The paper argues that compound *avaivartacakra* emerges and develops out of the discourse on *avaivartika* to signify a high level teaching on ultimate reality for bodhisattvas to cognize while at the same time enabling bodhisattvas to become irreversible from the attainment of Buddhahood.