The Influence of the *Avaivartikacakra* Mahāyāna Sūtra in Indian Buddhism Based on Its Citation in Indian Buddhist Commentaries

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1. Introduction

A significant, yet previously unstudied, self-proclaimed Mahāyāna scripture, is the *Avaivartikacakasūtra* ('The Discourse on Irreversibility').¹⁾ The *Avaivartikacakasūtra* is an early Mahāyāna scripture that focuses on the concept of the irreversibility (*avaivartika*) of bodhisattvas ("Buddhas-in-training") from the attainment of full Buddhahood. The concept of the irreversible (*avaivartika*) bodhisattva is considered to be one of the most vital subjects in the historical development of Mahāyāna Buddhism due to the concept's prevalence, as well as its transvaluing meaning, in early (pre-3rd century) Mahāyāna literature.²⁾ The *Avaivartikacakasūtra* provides the earliest and most comprehensive discussion of this concept among Mahāyāna scriptures other than the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. The *sūtra* is also notable for its advocacy of *ekayāna*, its usage of narrative displacement, and its rhetoric of 'word-play' through semantic elucidation or *nirukti*.³⁾ One may infer that this text was an influential Mahāyāna *sūtra* in Buddhist culture as indicated by its preservation and transmission in South, Central, and East Asia over many centuries.⁴⁾

2. Citations in Indian Buddhist Commentaries

The importance of the *Avaivartikacakasūtra* is also demonstrated through its active citation in indigenous commentaries on the *bodhisattva* path by prominent Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist scholars from the second to twelfth centuries. Previous studies have discussed how Indian masters' citations of a *sūtra* demonstrate the importance of a particular *sūtra* within the historical context of Indian Buddhism.⁵⁾ As we will see, the *Avaivartikacakasūtra* was an important text to support the views of a number of Indian Buddhist scholars.

2.1. *Sūtrasamuccaya*

The *Sūtrasamuccaya* is an anthology of *sūtra* citations traditionally attributed to Nāgār-

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juna, although recent discussion in modern scholarship has indicated that the author may be different from the Nāgārjuna who composed the *Madhyamakakārikā*. Nevertheless, the anthology had great influence on later Indian Buddhist scholarship. The author of the *Sūtrasamuccaya* cites the following portion from *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* to substantiate his view on *ekayāna*:

Mañjuśrī asked, “To what extent is this compatible with the dharma teachings of the Buddhas, the Blessed Ones?” [The Bhagavan [*Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra] replied], “The dharma teaching of the Buddhas, the Blessed Ones, is compatible with the discourse on irreversible dharma (*avaivartikadharmacakra*).” [The bodhisattva] asked, “Bhagavan, How is it that a Bhagavan sets forth the three vehicles and presently teaches dharma? [The Bhagavan [*Ābhāvṛtapadmaphullitagātra] replied] “Son of Good Family, sentient beings aspire for the inferior and when they do not enter the single vehicle, [the Buddhas] guide them with skill in means. Son of Good Family, the Buddhas, the Blessed Ones, have great skill in means. The Blessed One appears to those [sentient beings] at the time of the five degenerations and uses skill in means for those who do not aspire for the single vehicle.”⁶⁾

The citation is from the first chapter of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* although, in this section of the *sūtra* itself, the discussion does not involve Mañjuśrī but rather the bodhisattva Pleasant Sound (*Ānandokti, Tib. *sgra snyan*).

2.2. Ārya Vimuktisena (6th century) and Haribhadra (8th century)

The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* was popular among commentators of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* as a number of commentators to this *śāstra* make reference to the *sūtra*. We know the Sanskrit title of the text as *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* since the title of the *sūtra* is preserved in the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* commentaries of both Ārya-Vimuktisena and Haribhadra,⁷⁾ despite notable discrepancies among reconstructed titles preserved in the various editions of the Tibetan Kanjur.⁸⁾ Ārya-Vimuktisena and Haribhadra reference the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* in order to illustrate how the twenty types of *saṃgha* mentioned in verses 1.23–24 of the *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* are bodhisattvas.⁹⁾ Other Indian *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* commentators will reference the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* as well, with Dharmamitra in his *Prasphuṭapadā* (D 3796) providing several citations from the *sūtra* itself:

Here, the teaching refers to the bodhisattva as a Stream-enterer and so forth since both the basis of a term and the emanator are emanations and, since sentient beings are known to be afraid of the great waves of the sublime vehicle and aspire for the inferior, bodhisattvas become *śrāvakas* and are indicated to achieve pratyekabuddha awakening. It is construed through the basis of a term [, the

Avaivartikacakrasūtra states]:

“The unfabricated, unstained, passionless realm is indicated, it is indicated having perceived all the buddha-qualities.

That which the Buddhas teach does not conceptualize things afar nor conceptualize things near, therefore, their teachings are uncontaminated.

Proclaiming the contaminated to not exist, elucidated to immeasurable sentient beings, Those sentient beings do not see. In this way, a bodhisattva is called a *śrāvaka*.

Ānanda, with this intention, I have thoroughly taught [the meaning of] *śrāvaka*. Unrestricted is a bodhisattva, and therefore [a bodhisattva] should be known as a *śrāvaka*.’

Likewise: ‘Having understood these conditions, a bodhisattva is unrestricted and I have indicated a bodhisattva with the term ‘pratyekabuddha.’”

Further, these bodhisattvas are taught with the basis of the word having three distinctions for the Stream-enterer and so forth. This is cited from the *Ārya-avaivartikacakrasūtra*.¹⁰⁾

2.3. Bhāviveka (6th century) and Candrakīrti (7th century)

An unacknowledged Sanskrit verse from the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* is preserved in Candrakīrti’s *Prasannapadā*, and the verse is unattributed in the Tibetan translations of Bhāviveka’s *Prajñāpradīpa* and Avalokitavrata’s *Prajñāpradīpaṭīkā*. The Sanskrit as preserved in Poussin’s edition of the *Prasannapadā*, which is based on 18th century manuscripts from Nepal, is as follows:

anirvāṇaṃ hi nirvāṇaṃ lokanāthena deśitaṃ /
*ākāśena kṛto granthir ākāśenaiva mocitaḥ //*¹¹⁾

“The leader of the world has taught that there is no nirvāṇa in nirvāṇa.

A knot tied in space is released through space itself.”

The verse is cited in the commentaries in the context of the twenty-fifth chapter of Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamakaśāstra* that analyzes *nirvāṇa*. The earliest commentary to cite the verse is Bhāviveka in his *Prajñāpradīpa*.¹²⁾ Bhāviveka does not state the textual source for the verse whereas the *ṭīkā* subcommentary to Bhāviveka by Avalokitavrata notes the source of the verse as “the extensive Mahāyāna sūtras.”¹³⁾ Likewise, Candrakīrti cites the verse as spoken by the Bhagavan (Poussin 1970: 540: *uktaṃ ca bhagavatā*), but in the context of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* the verse is spoken by Ānanda at the beginning of the eleventh chapter.¹⁴⁾ The version of the verse as it occurs in the 12th century the Tibetan *Prasannapadā* translation of Kanakavarma and Pa-tshab nyi-ma grags is the version most cited in Tibetan commentaries. Just as the Tibetan commentaries do not recognize the source of the verse, I have located at least five Euro-American articles and books that do not source this

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verse either, even as the verse is a favorite among those who study Buddhist philosophy.¹⁵⁾

2.4. Avalokitavrata (late 7th century)

I have argued in recent publications that the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* is one among several early Mahāyāna sūtras that utilize *nirukti*, or semantic elucidation, as a form of rhetoric to transvalue mainstream Buddhist categories into *bodhisattva* embodied values.¹⁶⁾ The claim that such Mahāyāna sūtras like the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* are employing *nirukti* is also found among traditional commentators, although the underlying purport for traditional authors may be different from my modern critical standpoint. Avalokitavrata (late 7th century?) cites the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* three times in his *Prajñāpradīpaṭīkā* (D 3859) to provide *nirukti* for the terms *bhagavan*, *tathāgata*, and *buddha*. Avalokitavrata's citation for *tathāgata* is as follows:

Or in another way, the Blessed One has **stated a semantic elucidation** from the *Ārya-avaivartikacakrasūtra*: “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*.”¹⁷⁾

Avalokitavrata is not the only traditional commentator to cite the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* for the Buddha's use of semantic elucidation.

2.5. Kamalaśīla (740–795 CE)

Kamalaśīla also cites from the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* to illustrate semantic elucidation in the comments within his *Ārya-Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇīṭīkā* (D 4000):

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 ‘bhagavan’ as such as stated from the *Ārya-avaivartikacakrasūtra*: “He thoroughly indicates (*pradarśitaḥ*) to living beings (*dehinām*) that things are similar to space. He is fearless (*nirbhayaṭā*) with respect to that. Therefore, he is called ‘Bhagavan.’”¹⁸⁾

In addition to semantic elucidation, Kamalaśīla quotes the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* in his *Madhyamakāloka* (D 3887) to support his view of *ekayāna*:

... one should understand that teaching the three vehicles is a teaching that is itself skill-in-means. If it is not like this, there will be only contradiction with all that was formerly explained. The *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* states that “the teaching of dharma by all the Buddhas in every world-realm is similar to the irreversible wheel (*avaivartikacakra*). In this regard, the sentient beings of the Sāhā world-realm who appear at the time of the five corruptions aspire to the inferior and, since [they initially] do not enter into the teaching of the single vehicle (*ekayāna*), sentient beings are directed to Buddhahood through this method [of skill-in-means].”¹⁹⁾

2.6. Other References to *Avaivartikacakrasūtra*

Several scholars make reference to an “*avaivartikacakrasūtra*” (*’phags pa phyir mi ldog pa’i ’khor lo’i mdo*), although they are not actually citing the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* Mahāyāna scripture, but rather, are referencing either a section of the *Prajñāpāramitā* or the *Dhāraṇīśvararājaparivarta*. In the *Samśkṛtāsamśkṛtaviniścaya*²⁰⁾ of Daśabalaśrimitra reference is made to an *avaivartikacakrasūtra* (*’phags pa phyir mi ldog pa’i ’khor lo’i mdo*) when discussing the realization of the bodily witness (*kāyasākṣin*).²¹⁾ However, Daśabalaśrimitra is referencing a section of the *Pañcaviṃśatiprajñāpāramitā*. Likewise, Abhayākara Gupta in his *Munimatālaṃkāra*²²⁾ claims that Candrakīrti, in the last chapter of the *Madhyamakāvatāra* (verses 12.8–9), is a follower of the “*avaivartikacakrasūtra*” since Candrakīrti explains that the unproduced dharma-body is realized by the *saṃbhogakāya*. However, this reference to the “*avaivartikacakrasūtra*” is indicating the *Dhāraṇīśvararājaparivarta*, not the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* Mahāyāna sūtra. The *Dhāraṇīśvararājaparivarta* teaches three wheels of dharma, the third of which is known as the “irreversible wheel of dharma” (*avaivartikacakra*).²³⁾ Candrakīrti cites this sūtra extensively in the later portion of his *Madhyamakāvatārabhāṣya*.

3. Conclusion

I have briefly demonstrated the influence of the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* in Indian Buddhism through citations of the sūtra in Indian Buddhist *śāstras*. The authors of such technical digests generally cite the *Avaivartikacakrasūtra* Mahāyāna scripture as a scriptural authority (*āgama*) for one of four purposes: to support the claims of one universal vehicle (*ekayāna*), to demonstrate the Buddha’s use of semantic elucidations (*nirukti*), to illustrate that Stream-enterers, Once-returners, Non-returners, and so forth are actually bodhisattvas, and to illustrate the non-conceptuality of nirvāṇa.

1) James B. Apple, *Stairway to Nirvāṇa: A Study of the Twenty Saṃghas Based on the Works of Tsong Kha Pa* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008). Ratna Handurukande, “Avaivartacakra-Nāma-Mahāyāna-Sūtra,” *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* 2.3 (1973), 400–402.

2) 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 (2004): 211–279. James B. Apple, “On Avaivartika and Avaivartikacakra in Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature with Special Reference to the Lotus Sūtra,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy*,

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no. 27 (2011): 119–147.

3) James B. Apple, “‘Wordplay’: Emergent Ideology through Semantic Elucidation. A Rhetorical Technique in Mahāyāna Buddhist Formations,” *Bulletin for the Institute of Oriental Philosophy* 25 (2009): 161–173.

4) The *Avaivartikacakra* Mahāyāna sūtra is no longer extant in any Indic language but is preserved in Chinese, Tibetan, Manchu, and Mongolian translations. Three translations of this sūtra are preserved in Chinese translation. The first is the *Aweiyuezhizhe jing* 阿維越致遮經 (T. 266) translated by Dharmarakṣa in four *juan* on the 14th day, 10th month, 5th year of Taikang 泰康, Western Jin (西晉) dynasty (November 8th, AD 284) in Dunhuang 敦煌. The second translation is the *Butuizhuanfalun jing* 不退轉法輪經 (T. 267) translated during the Northern Liang (北涼) dynasty (AD 412–439). The third translation is the *Guangboyanjing butuizhuanlun jing* 廣博嚴淨不退轉輪經 (T. 268) translated by Zhiyan 智嚴 during the 4th year of Yuanjia 元嘉, Liusong 劉宋 dynasty (AD 427) in Zhiyuan Monastery (枳園寺) in Yangdu 楊都. The 9th century Tibetan translation is preserved in all Tibetan Kanjurs including Derge (no. 240) and Peking (no. 906).

5) Jens Braarvig, *Akṣayamatīnirdeśasūtra*, two Volumes (Oslo: Solum, 1993). Kaie Mochizuki, “How Did the Indian Masters Read the *Lotus Sūtra*?” *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*, vol. 59, no. 3 (2011): (95–103) 1169–1177.

6) *Avaivartikacakasūtra*, Derge, D, *mdo sde zha* 243a3–6. See Pāsādika, ed., *Nāgārjuna’s Sūtra-samuccaya: A Critical Edition of the mDo kun las btus pa* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag I Kommission, 1989) on the tenth theme (j) *theg pa gcig la mos pa’i sems can de dag ni shin tu rnyed par dka’ste/*, 130.15–131.5.

7) See Corrado Pensa, ed., *L’Abhisamayālaṃkāravṛtti di Ārya-Vimuktisena: Primo Abhisamaya; Testo e note crit* (Roma: Is.M.E.O., 1967), 46: “*Avaivartikacakra sūtre*,” and Unrai Wogihara, ed., *Abhisamayālaṃkāra’ālokā prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā* (Commentary on *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*) (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1932), 36.8: “*avaivartikacakra sūtra*.”

8) For example, the Berlin manuscript (B) provides the title *āryāvivartacakra-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra* and *āryāvevartacakra-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra*. Stogs palace (S) gives the title as *ārya-avaivartikacakra-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtra*. The Bathang Newark manuscript (Ne) gives *aryavevartyacakra-nāma-mahāyānasūtra*. Tabo fragment (Rn027) gives the title as *aryavenivartyacakra-nama-mahayāna-sutra*.

9) See Apple 2004, 2008.

10) Dharmamitra discusses this at D. No. 3796, 45b1–6. The *Prasphuṭapadā* is a *ṭīkā* commentary on Haribhadra’s *Abhisamayālaṃkāraśāstravivṛti*.

11) Louis de La Vallée Poussin, ed., [*Madhyamakavṛtti*]: *Mūlamadhyamakārikās* (*Mādhyamika-sūtras*) de Nāgārjuna avec la *Prasannapadā* commentaire de Candrakīrti (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1970), 540.

12) *Prajñāpradīpamūlamadhyamakavṛtti*, D. No. 3853, 248b.

13) *Prajñāpradīpaṭīkā*, D. No. 3859: 304a.

14) James B. Apple, *The Avaivartikacakasūtra: A Critical Edition of the Tibetan Text based on Eight*

teen Editions of the Kanjur (forthcoming).

15) See C. W. Huntington, *The Emptiness of Emptiness an Introduction to Early Indian Mādhyamika* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), 201n28; Th. Stcherbatsky, *The Conception of Buddhist Nirvana* [with Sanskrit Text of *Madhyamaka-Kārikā*], reprint of Second Revised and Enlarged Edition (New Delhi [u.a.]: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), 221; Christian Lindtner, *Miscellanea buddhica* (Kopenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1985); Guy Bugault, *Stances du milieu par excellence de Nāgārjuna = Madhyamaka-kārikās* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 335.

16) See Apple 2009.

17) *Prajñāpradīpaṭīka*, D. No. 3859: 21a6–7, 10a5, 44b7–45a1.

18) *Ārya-Avikalpapraveśadhāraṇīṭīkā*, D. No. 4000: 126a–b.

19) *Madhyamakāloka-nāma*, D. No. 3887: 241a4–7.

20) On this text see the work of Peter Skilling: “The Saṃskṛtāsaṃskṛta-viniścaya of Daśabalaśrīmitra,” *Buddhist Studies Review*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1987): 3–23; “The Sixty-Four Destructions according to the Saṃskṛtāsaṃskṛtaviniścaya,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, vol. 25 (1999): 113–120; “Vimuttimaggā and Abhayagiri: The Form-Aggregate according to the Saṃskṛtāsaṃskṛtaviniścaya,” *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, vol. 20 (1994): 171–210.

21) *Saṃskṛtāsaṃskṛtaviniścaya*, D. No. 3897, 285b6–7.

22) *Munimatālaṃkāra*, D. No. 3903, 208a–b.

23) The *Dhāraṇīśvararājaparivarta* has two versions extant in Chinese, *Tuoluonizizaiwangpusapin* 陀羅尼自在王菩薩品 (T. 397, juan 1–4) and the *Mahākaruṇāsūtra*, *Daaijing* 大哀經 (T. 398). The Tibetan version of the *sūtra* is preserved in chapter 1 and 2 of the *Tathāgatamahākaruṇanirdeśa* (D mdo sde Pa 142a–242b). Tibetan commentators discuss this *sūtra*’s teaching of three wheels in connection with the *Ratnagotravibhāgavyākhyā*. See Klaus-Dieter Mathes, *A Direct Path to the Buddha Within: Gö Lotsawa’s Mahāmudrā Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhāga* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008).

(This work was supported by a Grant-in-Aid of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in Canada)

〈Key words〉 Avaiartikacakrasūtra, nirukti, ekayāna, Candrakīrti, Kamalaśīla

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