Who Gets to Ride in the Great Vehicle? Self-Image and Identity Among the Followers of the Early Mahāyāna, by Paul Harrison

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As far as most Buddhist scholars nowadays are concerned, the Mahāyāna was a movement which originated in India some 300 or 400 years after the death of Gautama. Building on various doctrinal developments among certain schools of the so-called Hīnayāna, notably the Mahāsāṅghikas, it promoted a new ideal, that of the bodhisattva, or buddha-to-be, as opposed to the older arhat-ideal. In criticizing the arhat the early Mahāyānists are commonly thought to have been striking a blow against the monastic elitism of the Hīnayāna; and their new ideal is supposed to have been developed, in part at least, as a response to the spiritual needs and concerns of the laity.¹ This supposition also finds expression in the claim that, since the Buddha himself had been idealised beyond human reach, the bodhisattvas were invented as fitting recipients of the devotion (bhakti) of the masses, objects of a cult analogous to the cult of the saints in Christianity.² It has also been suggested that the new movement looked more favourably on the religious aspirations and capabilities of women. All these factors are cited as reasons for the success the Mahāyāna enjoyed in establishing itself as a truly popular religion, first in India and subsequently in other countries.

This paper sets out to examine all these assumptions, and to ask the question ‘What did it mean to be a follower of the Mahāyāna?’ In other words, who or what is a bodhisattva? Are bodhisattvas really exalted beings, ‘divine saviors’ or ‘saints’, or are they ordinary mortals? Can laypeople be bodhisattvas? Can
women be bodhisattvas? And whatever the answers to these questions, what were the consequences of affiliation with the Mahāyāna for people’s sense of their own religious identity vis-à-vis other Buddhists, and in relation to followers of other religious paths?

These are, of course, wide-ranging questions, and none of them is amenable to a simple answer. To reduce the scope of the problem, I propose to confine my remarks to the early Mahāyāna, using as sources the first Chinese translations of Mahāyāna sūtras. This comparatively small body of texts—11 in all—was produced in the second half of the 2nd century C.E., or shortly thereafter, by a small group of foreign translators working in the Han capital of Luoyang; most of them are the work of the Indo-Scythian Lokakṣema, active c. 168–189 C.E. Their value lies in the fact that they are the oldest literary evidence for the Mahāyāna, and preserve the earliest phase of that movement frozen, as it were, in an archaic semi-vernacular Chinese; later translations and the Sanskrit texts themselves can and often do contain later accretions, which reduce their value as historical evidence, at least as far as the early period is concerned. The 11 translations themselves have been described at length elsewhere; here they need only be listed with a few essential details:

1. AsPP : T.224, Daoxing banruo jing

= Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra
Translated by Lokakṣema and Zhu Foshuo, 179 C.E.


2. PraS : T.418, Banzhou sanmei jing

= Pratyutpanna-buddha-samākhyāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra
Translated by Lokakṣema, Zhu Foshuo et al., 179 C.E., sub-
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sequently revised, probably by members of Lokakṣema’s school, in 208. Parts of the original version survive.


3. 3DKP : T.624, Dun zhentueluo suowen rulai sanmei jingc
= Druma-kinnararāja-paripṛcchā-sūtra
Translated by Lokakṣema, c. 168–189 C.E.

There is one other Chinese translation (T.625), and one Tibetan version, entitled ’Phags-pa mi’am-ci’i rgyal-po sdong-pos zhus-pa zhes-by-a-ba theg-pa chen-po’i mdo. The Sanskrit text has been lost.

4. AjKV : T.626, Azheshi wang jingd
= Ajātaśatru-haukṛtya-vinodanā-sūtra
Translated by Lokakṣema, c. 168–189 C.E.

There are three other Chinese translations (T.627, T.628, T.629), and one Tibetan version, the ’Phags-pa ma-skyes-dgra’i ‘gyod-pa bsal-ba zhes-by-a-ba theg-pa chen-po’i mdo. The Sanskrit text is not extant.

5. TSC : T.280, Dousha jinge
= part of the Avatāmsaka-sūtra
Translated by Lokakṣema, c. 168–189 C.E.

There are two other Chinese versions (T.278, T.279), and one Tibetan version, the Sangs-rgyas phal-po-che zhes-by-a-ba shin-tu rgyas-pa chen-po’i mdo. The material corresponding to the TSC occurs in Chap. XII (Sangs-rgyas-kyi mtshan shin-tu bstan-pa) and Chap. XIV (De-bzhin gshegs-pa’i ’od-zer-las rnam-par sangs-rgyas-pa). For a partial English translation of this text see Thomas Cleary, transl., The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the

   = *Lokānuvatana-sūtra*  
   Translated by Lokakṣema, c. 168–189 C.E.  
   No other Chinese versions survive, but there is one Tibetan version, the *'Phags-pa 'jig-rten-gyi rjes-su 'thun-par 'jug-pa zhes-byab ba theg-pa chen-po'i mdo*. The complete Sanskrit text is lost, but a substantial number of verses from it appear in the *Mahāvastu* and the *Prasannapada*, for which see P. Harrison, “Sanskrit Fragments of a Lokottaravadin Tradition” in L.A. Hercus et al., eds., *Indological and Buddhist Studies: Volume in Honour of Professor J.W. de Jong on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Faculty of Asian Studies, Canberra, 1982), pp. 211–234.

7. **WWP** : T.458, *Wenshushili wen pusa shu jing*\(^g\)  
   = Sanskrit title unknown  
   Translated by Lokakṣema, c. 168–189 C.E.  
   There are no other versions; the Sanskrit text is lost.

8. **KP** : T.350, *Yirimonibao jing*\(^h\)  
   = *Kāśyapa-parivarta*  
   Translated by Lokakṣema, c. 168–189 C.E.  
   For a German rendering of Lokakṣema’s version, see F. Weller, “Kāśyapaparivarta nach der Han-Fassung verdeutscht”, *Buddhist Yearly* 1968/69 (Halle, 1970), pp. 57–221.  

9. AkTV : T.313, Achufo guojing
= Akṣobhya-tathāgatasya-vyūha-sūtra
Attributed to Lokakṣema, but probably the work of one of his contemporaries or of later members of his school.

Although the Sanskrit text has been lost, we still possess one other Chinese version (T.310, No. 6) and one Tibetan version, the 'Phags-pa de-bzhin-gshegs-pa mi-'khrugs-pa'i bkod-pa zhes-byab theg-pa chen-po'i mdo. For full bibliographical details, see Buddhist Text Information, 40–41 (June & Sept. 1984). A partial French translation has been published by J. Dantinne: La Splendeur de l'Inébranlable (Aksobhyasyūha), Tome I (Université Catholique de Louvain, Institut Orientaliste, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1983), while an English translation (with omissions) based on the Chinese text (T.310.6) may be found in Garma C.C. Chang, ed., op. cit., pp. 315–338.

10. CGD : T.630, Chengju guangming dingyi jing
= Sanskrit title unknown.
Attributed to Zhi Yao, active late 2nd century.
There are no other versions; the Sanskrit text is lost.

11. UP : T.322, Fa jīng jīng
There are two other Chinese versions (T.310, No. 19, and T.323) and one Tibetan version, the 'Phags-pa drag-shul-can-gyis zhus-pa zhes-byab theg-pa chen-po'i mdo, which has been translated into Japanese by Sakurabe Hajime in Daijō butten, Vol. IX (Chūōkōronsha, Tokyo, 1974), pp. 231–335.

It should be noted here that the use of these texts for historical research into Indian Buddhism presents certain problems, although, due to considerations of space, a full methodological discussion will have to be reserved for a later date. As translations they are reasonably reliable, but by no means as reliable as their Tibetan counterparts, against which they need to be checked. Although they were all produced at roughly the same time and roughly the same place, the original sūtras may well have been written at different times, in different places, and by different hands. Furthermore, those hands were almost certainly those of literate males, probably monks, which means that the sūtras must represent a limited point of view, albeit an influential one. These problems are all serious, to be sure, but it can nevertheless be argued that if these texts are used with the appropriate caution, their evidential value is substantial, especially in view of the fact that, apart from a small number of inscriptions,5 we have little else to assist our enquiries. They certainly contain sufficient data to enable us to arrive at unequivocal answers to at least some of our questions.

To begin with, how is the Mahāyāna referred to in these translations? The term Mahāyāna itself is found, either transliterated (moheyan1) or translated (dadao⁵, “the Great Way”), but it is surprisingly rare (about 20 occurrences in all). Not much more frequent is the use of the term “Bodhisattva Way” (oysa-dao⁶), which may or may not render bodhisattvavāyāna or bodhisattvamārga in the original Sanskrit (or Indic) text. If we examine those translations for which the Sanskrit is still extant, we find, e.g., that in Lokakṣema’s version of the KP pusadāo occurs several times, twice translating mahāyāna (KP 3, 118), once bodhisattva-mārga (KP 12), and once in a periphrastic rendering of udārādhimuktas as “those who delight in the Bodhisattva
Way” (KP 11). In the AsPP we find it used for duskara-cārikā (428b18) and bodhisattva-cārikā (428b20), but most often, in the expression xing pusadao zhe⁵, it renders bodhisattvayānikāḥ pud-galāḥ, “people who are adherents of the Bodhisattvayāna” (e.g. 447b3,24–25,465c9–10). When the term is found in other translations it usually occurs in the phrase xing (or qiu) pusadao zhe⁵P, “those who practise (or seek) the Bodhisattva Way”, pointing once again to an original bodhisattvayānika. The rarity of the terms mahāyāna and bodhisattvayāna already invites the conclusion that at this stage there was no rigid division of the Buddhist Sangha into two hostile camps to the extent that the modern understanding of the terms ‘Mahāyāna’ and ‘Hinayāna’ implies. There was indeed a new spirit abroad: the authors of our texts are devoted to its promulgation, but there is little evidence of any urge on their part to enshrine their different point of view in hard and fast sectarian categories, something to which we shall return later. Rather than speak of the Mahāyāna, they chose to address themselves to those substantive issues which we have come to associate with that movement, i.e. the doctrines of emptiness (śūnyatā), the perfection of wisdom (prajñāpāramitā) and the five other perfections, skill-in-means (upāyakauśalya) and, above all, the career of the bodhisattva, the aspirant to awakening or buddhahood. It is especially in their treatment of the bodhisattva that we can see how these early Mahāyāna writers conceived of their identity and their place within the Buddhist world.

In these archaic Chinese texts the word bodhisattva is almost always transliterated as pusā⁹, although the UP uses the translation kaishi” (“the revealer”) while the CGD has settled on the rendering mingshi⁸ (“the enlightened one”). In most of our sūtras the word occurs prolifically, and is generally neutral with regard to lay/monastic status and gender. (As far as the latter is concerned, this is not surprising, since Classical Chinese lacks any kind of inflectional system for conveying distinctions of gender, number and case; but in the original Sanskrit sūtras the word bodhisattva would always have been masculine.) Frequently, however, different types of bodhisattvas are distinguished, the most common distinction being a twofold one between ‘renunciant’ or ‘monastic’ bodhisattvas, those who have left the household life to devote themselves full-time to spiritual matters, and ‘house-
holder' or 'lay' bodhisattvas, who practise their religion as full members of society. These two categories are sometimes further subdivided according to gender to arrive at the "four classes of disciples", i.e. bodhisattvas who are monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. I propose to look at the basic twofold lay/monastic division first, and then examine the male/female one to see what distinction, if any, is made on the basis of gender. As simple as this approach sounds, it does present difficulties, since the male is taken as paradigmatic, and is often clearly intended even when the texts are speaking generally in terms which could apply equally well to men and women. Before we look at these divisions, however, let us first see what terms are used to refer to the "four classes of disciples" collectively and individually.

The expression "four classes of disciples" itself (Chinese: sibei dizit or sibu dizii) occurs occasionally (e.g. AsPP 467b29,469a18–19; AkTV 757b15–16; CGD 456a2; PraS 915a10), as does the full enumeration of these classes, i.e. biqiù biqiuni youposai youpoyi (=bhiksus, bhikṣunīs, upāsakas and upāsikās, or monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen; e.g. PraS 918a8–9; DKP 364a18). These terms are, of course, of general application, and are frequently used in our texts without any specific reference to followers of the Mahāyāna. Often, however, the connection is explicit, especially in those few passages in which the four classes are discussed in sequence. The best example of this is Chapter 6 of Lokakṣema's version of the PraS, which deals in turn with "Bodhisattvas who forsake desire and become bhiksus" (pusa qi aiyu zuo biqiùw), "bhikṣunīs who are mahāyāna-saṃprasthita" i.e. nuns who have set out in the Mahāyāna (biquini qiu moheyan-sanbazhi), "white-robed bodhisattvas who cultivate the Way while living at home" (baiyi pusā jujia xiudao) and "upāsikās who are mahāyāna-saṃprasthita" (youpoyi qiu moheyan-sanbazhi) (PraS 909b12–910c29). We also find the expressions bhikṣu-bodhisattva or bodhisattva-bhikṣu, i.e. biqiù pusā (e.g. PraS 909b24,26–27; AkTV 752c22; AsPP 461b23), or, in the more idiosyncratic renderings of the CGD and the UP, haishi quyia wei (or xiù) dao ("the revealer who has left home to pursue the Way": UP 15c3,10–11; 19c1–2) or mingshi chu-e ("the enlightened one who eliminates evil": CGD 451b7, 458b10), in which quyia and its equivalents are probably doing service for an original Sanskrit pravrajita, "one who has gone forth". Often,
however, it is simply clear from the context that the text is dealing with renunciant bodhisattvas, and the same holds true for lay bodhisattvas, who, when specified, are referred to as zaijia\textsuperscript{ae} or jujia\textsuperscript{af} pusa ("bodhisattvas who remain in the home") or ba\textsuperscript{ag} pusa ("white-robed bodhisattvas"). Our texts devote considerable attention to these lay bodhisattvas, those who pursue the goal of buddhahood through observance of the Five Precepts, study of Mah\textsuperscript{a}y\textsuperscript{a}na s\textsuperscript{ū}tras and meditation. One passage in the Pra\textsuperscript{S} on the layman bodhisattva sums up much of this material particularly well:

"White-robed bodhisattvas who, on hearing this sam\textsuperscript{ā}dhi, wish to study and cultivate it, should adhere firmly to the Five Precepts and keep themselves pure. They should not drink wine, nor should they give it to others to drink. They should not have intercourse with women—they should not have it themselves, nor should they teach others to have it. They should not have any affection for their wives, they should not hanker after their sons and daughters, and they should not hanker after possessions. They should always think longingly of leaving their wives and taking up life as s\textit{r}ama\textit{n}\text{ā}s. They should always keep the Eightfold Fast, and at the time of the Fast they should always fast in a Buddhist monastery. They should always think of giving without thinking that they themselves will get merit from it—they should give for the sake of all people. They should love their good teachers, and when they see bhik\textit{S}us who keep the precepts they ought not to despise them or speak ill of them." (Pra\textsuperscript{S} 910b12–21)

A number of common themes stand out here. These bodhisattvas may well be in the world, but they are not of it. Like lotuses, they grow out of the mud of the passions (KP 72–75), but because of their endowment with wisdom and skill-in-means they are undefiled by them (KP 48; DKP 351a24). To ensure that they remain undefiled, they must be strict in their adherence to the Five Precepts, especially those relating to intoxicants and sex, hence a negative attitude to all possible objects of attachment, particularly wives and children, is often recommended (e.g. UP 16c2–17a14, 18b7–c11; AsPP 455b20–26). This incidentally reveals the extent to which these s\textsuperscript{ū}tras were written from a male point of view, since bodhisattvas are never urged to regard their husbands as demons, sources of misery and so on. The house-
hold life is in fact a curse, since it destroys all one's 'roots of goodness' and only heaps more fuel on the fire of the passions (UP 17b20–c26), consequently bodhisattvas are best advised to quit it as soon as possible (DKP 353b26–27, 356c28–29). But as long as they choose to retain their lay status, they should not forget to treat their monastic counterparts with due reverence and generosity (UP 16a5–12, 19a1–b24). It is clear, therefore, that there is a definite ambivalence in these texts about the position of lay bodhisattvas. On the one hand lay bodhisattvas frequently occupy the centre stage, both in terms of the narrative framework of the sūtras and in terms of the teachings expounded in them (this is especially so in the PraS, CGD and UP); on the other hand they are constantly exhorted to leave lay life behind, to become renunciants, and, what is more, to embrace the "ascetic qualities" (dhuta-guna), the discipline of the solitary forest-dwelling monk or nun (KP 17, PraS 903b24–25; cf. AsPP 461a10–b18). The UP even goes so far as to say that "no bodhisattva has ever attained the Way [i.e. awakening] as a householder: they all leave home and go into the wild, and it is by living in the wild that they attain the Way" (UP 19a21–22). As for the renunciant bodhisattvas themselves, in those passages which are explicitly or implicitly devoted to them, observance of the Vinaya looms large, together with respect for teachers, especially those from whom they hear Mahāyāna sūtras, be they male or female, lay or renunciant (e.g. PraS 909c1–9). Renunciants are urged to teach in their turn, to give the 'gift of the Dharma', but without any expectation of reward. For them too the virtues of the solitary life are extolled, as well as the conquest of desires and attachments, and they are warned of the perils of doubt and sloth. Most of this material, with its strong ethical emphasis, is of course fairly standard to all forms of Buddhism.

Despite some ambivalence about the value of the household life, we can see already that there is no doubt about the existence of both lay and renunciant bodhisattvas. Even bodhisattvas who have attained the advanced stage of 'non-regression', who are avaivartika, assured of attaining awakening, can still be laypeople (see e.g. AsPP 455b20–c5). However, when we turn to the question of whether women can be full bodhisattvas, the answer is not so clear. We have already observed that in listing the four classes of disciples, the PraS describes nuns and laywomen not
as bodhisattvas, as it does the monks and laymen, but as mahāyāna-
samprasthita, "set out in the Mahāyāna". In other words it
scrupulously avoids calling women bodhisattvas. Theoretically
speaking, women should be capable of assuming the title
bodhisattva. In nearly all our texts the teachings are addressed
to "sons and daughters of good family" (Sanskrit: kulaputra-
kuladuhitṛ; Chinese usually: shan nanzi shan nüren8), and it is
made clear in most cases that both groups are expected to em-
brace the particular doctrine or practice being expounded. Fur-
thermore, in some texts the terms "sons and daughters of good
family" and "bodhisattvas" are used interchangeably (e.g. AsPP
446b10ff.; AkTV 759al6ff., 762a16; WWP 435b14–15; UP
15b24ff.), though it is not always the case that sons and
daughters of good family are followers of the Mahāyāna (e.g.
AkTV 763b17–21). In addition, women can conceive the aspira-
tion to awakening (bodhicitta). This happens in at least two texts,
the DKP, in which the 84,000 wives of King Druma take this
step (359b11ff., 360c26ff.), and the AsPP, in which an upāsikā
by the name of Dajieai (Sanskrit equivalent unknown) has her
eventual awakening predicted by Śākyamuni, who recalls her
initial aspiration to it under the Buddha Dipamkara.9 Now those
who have conceived the aspiration to awakening—who have, in
other words, "set out in the Mahāyāna" (mahāyāna-sampras-
thita)10—are technically bodhisattvas, yet our sūtras display a con-
sistent (or perhaps inconsistent?) reluctance to accord this title
to women. This can only be because of a negative attitude to-
wards the female sex, an attitude which is clearly demonstrable
throughout these early texts. The DKP provides the best exam-
ple of it. Even though the 84,000 wives of Druma conceive the
aspiration to awakening, they are concerned about the fact that
"it is difficult for a woman to attain anuttara-samyak-sambodhi",
whereupon the Buddha proceeds to tell them at length about
the things they have to do to leave off being women and quickly
attain rebirth as males (DKP 361b9–362a2). Later he predicts
their rebirth as males in the Tuṣita heaven in the presence of
Maitreya (362a20–28). This theme of the undesirability of birth
as a woman and the necessity of a change of sex is a common
one: the upāsikā Dajie has to be reborn as a male before she
makes any real progress (AsPP 458a18–19), while the same is
true of Sadāprarudita’s 500 female companions (AsPP 477b14–
In other texts as well women are told that they should always aspire to rebirth as males (e.g. CGD 457b19–20). According to the AsPP (454b27–28) non-regressing bodhisattvas are never reborn as women, although the DKP claims that a bodhisattva endowed with skill-in-means may manifest in female form in order to teach women (358c11).

When we look at the descriptions of buddhafields, which represent ideal worlds from a Buddhist point of view, we find that either women are not present at all, as in Druma’s buddhaksetra Candravimala (DKP 362a17), or they are infinitely more beautiful and virtuous than the women of this world, as in Aksobhya’s buddhaksetra Abhirati (AkTV 755c28–756a2). The portrayal of the female inhabitants of Abhirati is especially revealing (756b3–15), since they are supposed to lack the vices of the women of this world, who are said to be “ill-favoured and ugly, with harsh tongues, jealous of the Dharma and addicted to heretical practices”. For the paragons of femininity in Abhirati, by contrast, fine clothes and jewelry literally grow on trees, they feel no pain or weariness in pregnancy or childbirth, and they are free of “offensive discharge from the stinking place” (undoubtedly the ‘polluting’ flow of menstrual blood), all thanks to the former vow of Aksobhya (see AkTV 753a11-16 for this; cf. AsPP 455b19-25). The supposed foibles and defects of women are also highlighted in these sūtras by those passages which deal with the special regulations and requirements for nuns and laywomen who follow the Bodhisattva Path (see esp. PraS 910a15-b9, c6-29; CGD457b14-c29; see also DKP 361b11-362a2). Although there is considerable overlap in these passages with those pertaining to monks and laymen, certain qualities appear to be more readily ascribed to women, such as an excessive concern for personal adornment, spiteful and malicious gossip, jealousy, deceitfulness, superstition and fondness for non-Buddhist religious practices.

If we attempt to sum up our findings on the status of women as far as these early Mahāyāna sūtras are concerned, we must conclude that although women, both lay and renunciant, are included as recipients of the new teaching on a theoretically equal footing with men, they are generally represented in such an unfavourable light as to vitiate any notion of the Mahāyāna as a movement for sexual equality. Compared with the situation
in the Pāli Canon, in which women are at least as capable as men of attaining the highest goal, arhatship, the position of women in the Mahāyāna has hardly changed for the better, since women cannot attain buddhahood, and even the title of bodhisattva is withheld from them. Of course all this reflects the attitudes of the men (probably monks) who produced these texts, but this does not make the conclusion any less inescapable: although both men and women can ride in the Great Vehicle, only men are allowed to drive it.

Before we turn to the drivers and passengers of the “Small Vehicle”, there is one other question we must deal with, that relating to the so-called “Celestial Bodhisattvas”, Avalokiteśvara and the others, those compassionate agents of salvation who, according to some authorities, were provided by the Mahāyāna in response to the devotional needs of the masses. It has been suggested that these figures were called mahāsattaivas (“Great Beings”) to distinguish them from other bodhisattvas. There is no evidence for such a distinction in our texts: mahāsattva (probably signifying “one whose aspiration or courage is great”) is widely used together with bodhisattva, and is virtually a synonym for it (see AsPP 427b13-27 for a discussion of its meaning). The double expression bodhisattva-mahāsattva is employed with reference to householders, occurs interchangeably with “sons and daughters of good family”, and is even used when the talk turns to bodhisattvas who fall into error (e.g., AsPP 444c2, 446c22ff.). Be that as it may, a few well-known bodhisattvas do make an appearance. The name Avalokiteśvara occurs only twice, in lists of bodhisattvas in the CGD and the UP, suggesting that for the writers of our texts he was a non-entity, but Mañjuśrī, on the other hand, appears in six texts, one of which, the AjKV, glorifies him in the most lavish terms. Given the heavy Perfection of Wisdom slant of most of these sūtras, this is not altogether surprising. The name of Maitreya also comes up fairly frequently. For all this, there is no evidence to suggest a widespread cult of the great bodhisattvas, and no passages recommend devotion to them. They function as symbols rather than as saviours. There is, however, evidence for the development of the cults of the Buddhas Amitābha and Aksobhya by the late 2nd century C.E. Although the Sukhāvatīvyūha was not translated into Chinese until the middle of the 3rd century, the concept of rebirth in
the *buddhaṅksetra* of Amitābha as a religious goal is found in the *PraS*, while the *AkTV* is entirely devoted to Akṣobhya and Abhirati. But as far as *bodhisattvas* are concerned the *initial message* of the Mahāyāna is clear: people should not worship *bodhisattvas*, they should become *bodhisattvas* themselves.13

We have seen something of how the identity of the different classes of Mahāyānists in relation to each other was defined. What we must now look at is how these people saw themselves as a group *vis-à-vis* other Buddhists. The first thing that strikes one when reading these early Mahāyāna *sūtras* is their extreme defensiveness. The texts fairly groan under the weight of their own self-glorification, and kalpas can tick by while one wades through chapter after chapter proclaiming the merits of this doctrine or that practice. This is not simply due to literary hyperbole, to that Indian device, in common use since the *Vedas*, of praising one thing—a god, a place, a spiritual discipline—by claiming that it is superior to all other things of that class put together. This is clearly present, and should be taken with the appropriate grain of salt. But there is more to it than that, and this is indicated by the numerous passages excoriating the detractors of the new teachings, usually portrayed as idle and perverse monks who, when they are not busy spreading base calumnies and lies about the Mahāyāna, are out breaking the precepts. That the Mahāyāna remained for a long time a minority movement in the land of its birth is confirmed by the well-known reports of Chinese pilgrims in India. In its infancy it was probably even more insignificant numerically, despite the astonishingly prolific literary creativity it gave rise to, and was therefore quite naturally on the defensive. But on the defensive against what, one might ask? Nowadays it is common practice to think of Buddhism as dividing into two schools or sects, Mahāyāna on one side and Hinayāna, more properly a group of sects, on the other. The early *sūtras* provide no strong support for this view. True, the term *hinayāna* is found, translated as *xiaodao* ("Small Way"), but it occurs only *four* times (*KP* 25; *DKP* 357a19; *AsPP* 426b6; *CGD* 455c15), and is thus even rarer than the term *mahāyāna*, which is itself of infrequent occurrence, as we have seen. Much more frequent are translations of the terms *srāvakayāna* ("Vehicle of the Disciples") and *pratyekabuddhayāna* ("Vehicle of the Solitary Buddhas"), or simply "Śrāvakas and
Pratyekabuddhas”, which is even more common.

*Pratyekabuddha* is generally transcribed as *pizhifoa*, but in several of our texts translations appear, e.g. *yinyuanjuefo* in *CGD* 454b20 (implying *pratyayabuddha*) and *yuanyijue* in *AkTV* 752a11, the latter meaning “by one(self) awakened”. Śrāvaka, on the other hand, has the literal sense of “hearer”, but the standard Chinese equivalent *shengwen*, or “voice-hearer”, seldom occurs in these early texts (e.g., *DKP* 351c20; *AjKV* 392b19). We find instead *dizi* (“disciple”) or *(a)luohan*, a transcription of *arhat*. In fact, in the overwhelming majority of cases *srāvaka* is rendered as *aluohan*, and *srāvakayāna*, which occurs less frequently, as *aluohandao*, the “Way of the Arhats”, a term which also does service for *arhattva* or *arhatphala*, the attainment of arhatship. I find this choice of words very significant. In his book *Buddhist Images of Human Perfection* (Delhi, 1982), Nathan Katz attempts to establish the essential identity of the *arhat* of the Pāli Canon and the *bodhisattva* of the Mahāyāna *sūtras*. In his concluding chapter he claims to have demonstrated that “the Mahāyāna texts speak in two distinct ways about the arhat. The first way of speaking is to show that the arhat is spiritually inferior to the bodhisattva; however, we have demonstrated that there is a conceptual distinction between the *srāvaka* as one who thinks he has attained more than he actually has, and the true arhat. When speaking about the *srāvaka* pejoratively, the standard context is in talk about meditation, and the *srāvaka* is one who has mistakenly identified proficiency at meditation with *arahatti* itself . . . The second way of speaking about the arhat in these early Mahāyāna texts is to identify the arhat with the bodhisattva” (Katz, 1982:275). Although I am in substantial agreement with Katz’s overall thesis, and in general sympathy with any attempt to abolish imaginary discontinuities between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna, I find that his conclusions in this particular respect rest on shaky ground, especially as regards the distinction he claims Mahāyāna *sūtras* make between *srāvakas* and *arhats*. If our texts are anything to go by, there is no such distinction: by consistently rendering *srāvaka* by *arhat*, Lokakṣema and his colleagues showed they were in no doubt that *srāvakas* are both people who aspire to arhatship or *nirvāṇa* and people who actually attain that goal. Additional confirmation of this is furnished by the frequent appearance of well-
known historical arhats, the great śrāvakas Śāriputra, Mahāmaudgalyāyana and others, as representatives of the supposedly inferior or partial dispensation.

Nor is there any doubt that the level these venerable figures represent, that of the arhats and the pratyekabuddhas (note that the pratyekabuddhas are frequently subsumed under the arhats), is one that is to be transcended by the bodhisattvas (see e.g. AjKV 398b4-14). A hierarchy of attainments is in fact envisaged, leading from the state of an ordinary person (Skt. prthagjana, Chinese fanren\textsuperscript{ar}) at the bottom, through those of a ‘stream-winner’ (śrōtāpanna, xutuohuan\textsuperscript{as}), a ‘once-returner’ (sakṛdāgāmin, situohan\textsuperscript{at}), a ‘non-returner’ (anāgāmin, anahan\textsuperscript{au}), an arhat and a pratyekabuddha to the state of a buddha or a tathāgata at the top (e.g. DKP 366b15-16; AsPP 429b4-c12).\textsuperscript{14} In aiming for the top, bodhisattvas, aspirants to the full awakening of a buddha, are warned repeatedly not to fall back to the level of the arhats/ śrāvakas and the pratyekabuddhas or to join their ranks, and such a regression is represented as a fearful misfortune (DKP 349c25-26, 350c7-11; AkTV 759a19-20, 760a11-12, 15-16; AjKV 391a19-20; AsPP 445b3-4, 447a14, 451b29-c22, 452a1ff.). This actually happens at one point in the AsPP, where 60 novice bodhisattvas attain arhatship despite themselves because they lack perfect wisdom and skill-in-means, in the same way that a giant bird without wings cannot help plummeting to earth from the top of Mt. Meru (AsPP 453c2-25). To avoid such a disaster, bodhisattvas must ensure that they are not contaminated by the attitudes of arhats and pratyekabuddhas (DKP 356b1-2, c9, 365a4-12; AkTV 761c25-26; AjKV 389c3; AsPP 460a2-4, 463c13-14; PraS 903c6), and they must resist the temptation to aspire to their goals, i.e., to opt for a premature nirvāṇa, to “achieve realisation midway” (AkTV 752a11; AsPP 448b25-28, 458c8-22, 459b5-10, 467a13ff.; DKP 350c11-14; AjKV 392c18ff.). The śrāvakayāna is characterised by attachment and limitation (AjKV 392b19-23), and those who opt for it do so primarily out of fear of samsāra, which renders them incapable of aspiring to buddhahood (AjKV 394c3ff.). Not only is their courage thus inferior to that of the bodhisattvas, but their wisdom is too (KP 78-79; LAN 751b20-21; AsPP 426b2, c19-20, 427b24, 462b17). Unlike the advanced bodhisattvas, they have not really overcome fear and attachment; for that reason the Great Śrāvakas and arhats
Mahākāśyapa, Śāriputra, Mahāmaudgalyāna and company are unable to resist the temptation to dance to the celestial music of King Druma; however, the novice bodhisattvas are equally helpless (DKP 351c8ff.). In another context, these great Arhats lament their own inferior attainments (AjKV 394c3-395b22). Therefore bodhisattvas are infinitely superior to śrāvakas/arhats and pratyekabuddhas (KP 80-85, 90; AsPP 468a27-28; DKP 365c22-28). Those who teach “the Bodhisattva Path” are one’s “good friends” (kalyāṇa-mitra), while those who direct one towards “the Paths of the Śrāvaka and the Pratyekabuddha” are “bad friends” (pāpa-mitra) (KP 13; AsPP 427b1-10; DKP 360a13-18).

Despite all this rather uncomplimentary material, however, the attitude displayed by these texts towards arhats is not entirely negative. Since bodhisattvas aspire to bring nirvāṇa to all sentient beings, it is not surprising that they should try to make a place for arhats in their picture of the world, even if it is not in the foreground. In most of our sūtras the great śrāvakas, the bhikṣus who were arhats, are present, and presumably they are not just there to act as figures of fun or to lend the proceedings an air of historical authenticity, even if these are important functions they sometimes perform. One has only to think, for example, of the role Subhūti plays in the AsPP. The followers of the bodhisattva way clearly had to face the fact that, despite all their polemics and hyperbole, they shared their membership of the saṅgha with people who continued to believe that arhatship was the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice, who sought their own liberation above all else, and who, as members of the saṅgha, were still worthy of respect (e.g. UP 16a5-12). Therefore, even in their idealised descriptions of the buddhakṣetras, and in the predictions (vyākaraṇa) which are scattered throughout these texts, they usually envisage the peaceful co-existence of bodhisattvas with śrāvakas. Although in the buddhafiel Sadāvighuṣṭa (?) in the AjKV (397a8) there is only a bodhisattva-saṅgha, and in Druma’s world Candravimala in the DKP (362b19-21) “there are no other paths... only the host of bodhisattvas, all of the Mahāyāna” (see also DKP 363b9-10 for a similar case), in other instances śrāvakas are also present. For example, the śrāvakas of Akṣobhya’s world Abhirati are described at length (AkTV 756c24-758a15), and they share that world happily with
bodhisattvas. In fact, Abhirati teems with so many arhats that it is described as an arhat-kṣetra (AkTV 762c5-13), while both those who follow the Śrāvakayāna and those who follow the Bodhisattvayāna there are assured of freedom from molestation by Māra (AkTV 755a1-3, 758b15-21, 759b24-26; see also AjKV 393c24-27; AsPP 458a26-27, 469a20-21; and CGD 455a4 for further examples of co-existence). In a similar vein, most of our texts carry, at particular points in the narrative, descriptions of realisations attained by various members of the audience in response to the new teachings. In these the attainment of “stream-winning” and arhatship figures prominently (e.g., DKP 367a27-b1; AjKV 406a27-b1; KP 138, 145, 149; AsPP 451a12-15, 453b29-c3; PraS 919b18-22; CGD 454b2-7; UP 19b24-27).

Because of the general philosophical standpoint of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, one would expect to find in these early texts at least some acknowledgement of the purely conventional nature of the distinctions we have been talking about. The AsPP, for one, makes such an acknowledgement, conceding that all the grades of attainment from śrotāpatti to buddhahood partake of the same fundamental “suchness” (tathatā), in which there are no distinctions (450a4-8), that all these grades spring from the Perfection of Wisdom (451a17-24), and that in terms of “suchness” neither the three vehicles (of śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas and buddhas) nor the one vehicle can be apprehended (454a18-29). Consequently bodhisattvas should not think of themselves as far from the attainments of arhats and pratyekabuddhas and close to buddhahood (466b13-c14).

For all that, distinctions are set up in these texts. The issues are extremely complex, and the evidence is equivocal, but not so equivocal as to support Katz’s contention that the much-maligned śrāvakas of these early Mahāyāna sūtras were merely conceited monks who mistook their own meditational attainments for final liberation, not full arhats—or his claim that bodhisattvas and arhats are essentially the same. This may in fact be so, but that is not what the texts say. What they do tell us is that the early adherents of the Bodhisattvayāna—who were probably very much in the minority—were prepared to go to great lengths to uphold their ideal against what they conceived to be the traditional goal of Buddhist practice, namely arhatship or nīrṇāṇa for oneself alone, but they were not prepared to write
off the rest of the Buddhist saṅgha or sever their own connection with it by the wholesale use of such terms as “Hinayāna” and “Mahāyāna” as sectarian categories. It is interesting to compare this situation with that which currently obtains in Burma, a supposedly Theravādin country. In his *Buddhism and Society* (2nd ed., University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982), pp. 61-63, Melford Spiro notes the long tradition in Burma of aspiration to buddhahood, and the presence of a small number of people who, without bringing in any notions of Hinayāna and Mahāyāna, refer to themselves as *hpaya laung* (“Embryo Buddhas”), i.e. *bodhisattvas,* Can this be a distant echo of the state of affairs that once existed in India, before followers of “the Bodhisattva Path” started to cut themselves off from their fellow Buddhists, and before the distinction between the two ‘vehicles’ was anything more than a different perception of the goal of the religious life?

Turning now to other religious paths, we find that there is nothing unequivocal about the attitude displayed in these texts towards them. The usual designation for these paths is *waidao* "outside ways”, although *yudao* (“other ways”), *yidao* (“different ways”) and *xiedao* (“heretical ways”) are also found (as well as combinations of these, with or without *ren* added), rendering a number of Sanskrit terms such as *lokayata* (*KP* 5, 111), *drṣṭikṛta* (*KP* 18), *drṣṭigata* (*KP* 65, 109), *parapravādin* (*KP* 95), *anyatīrthya-parivṛājaka* (*AsPP* 433c21ff.) and so on. These non-Buddhist ways are not to be followed by the *bodhisattva* (*DKP* 356c7, 357a7-8; *AjKV* 398a22, 406a6; *PraS* 910c11, 912b29, 915a26, 916c7-8; *UP* 16a15-16), but rejected and overcome (*DKP* 357c4; *PraS* 911c5), their followers ideally being brought within the Buddhist fold (*DKP* 358c20-21, 359a25-28). Their defeat is often closely linked with the defeat of Māra (*DKP* 348c15, 362a17). Several *sūtras* go beyond these vague generalities, and urge followers of the Bodhisattvayāna not to sacrifice to or worship the gods, but go only to the Triple Gem for refuge (*DKP* 361b15-16; *PraS* 910c10-12; *UP* 17a20-21; *AsPP* 454b25-27, 455c9). However, only one text, the *WWP*, goes into any detail on any non-Buddhist religious practices—in this case brahmanical ritual (438a10ff.). The evidence is slim, but what there is suggests that the Bodhisattvayāna demanded that its adherents devote themselves exclusively to Buddhism, and regarded other faiths as beyond the pale.
Bringing all our findings together, we can make the following observations. The point of view presented in the earliest Chinese translations of Mahāyāna sūtras is most probably that of Mahāyānist bhikṣus. For this group bodhisattvas were certainly not just semi-mythical beings raised on high to receive the adoration of the masses, but real flesh-and-blood people, among whom they counted themselves, who had conceived the bodhicitta, the aspiration for awakening, and were pursuing the appropriate course of training either in the monastic context or in the household life. There is no sign at all of any cult of the “Celestial Bodhisattvas”; this was probably a later development. As far as these bodhisattva-bhikṣus were concerned, women were part of the movement, and the new teachings were addressed to them as well as to men. At the same time the texts reveal that women were not regarded as in all respects the spiritual equals of men. If this kind of attitude was enshrined in the sūtras, which, after all, embody the theories and ideals of the movement, it is hardly likely that in practice the women who followed the Mahāyāna fared any better than their Śrāvakayāna sisters. The Mahāyāna takes a hard line against other faiths, in theory at any rate, but its attitude to the rest of the Buddhist fold is characterised by ambivalence and defensiveness, and it gives every appearance of being a minority movement struggling to maintain the authenticity and validity of its teachings with a truly prodigious degree of polemical ‘overkill’. It may well be the case that in its attack on the arhat-ideal the Mahāyāna was setting up a straw man, but this is not the place to decide whether the attainments of the bodhisattvayānīka and the śrāvakayānīka were essentially identical. Buddhahood may or may not be the same as arhatship, but it is certain that the followers of the Mahāyāna placed a higher premium on aspiration to it, which implies that they perceived a difference. What is equally certain is that Buddhism was (and still is) plagued by a problem. We could call it the problem of the “ever-receding ideal”. In Gautama’s own time, many hundreds of people attained arhatship like him. Four or five hundred years later, when the Buddha had grown idealised and remote, and arhats were few and far between, many people vowed to attain awakening, and thereby became bodhisattvas. One wonders how many centuries passed before even bodhisattvahood became as remote an ideal as buddhahood, and the goal had to be reformulated anew. Perhaps,
however, it is in the nature of religious systems not only to undergo continual transformation and renewal, but also to present us with ideals which are always just out of reach, with paradises that shimmer on the margins of possibility, and with vehicles which we know we could all ride to salvation, if only we could catch up with them and climb aboard.

NOTES


2. This is the view of Dayal (see Bodhisattva Doctrine, pp. 31, 35), whose work has had a seminal effect on this area of study. Dayal’s understanding of the bodhisattva-ideal is reflected in the writings of many other scholars. A particularly good example is T. Ling, The Buddha (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1976), pp. 19-20:

Later on in India a form of Buddhism emerged, alongside the Theravada, which was characterised by beliefs in, and practices associated with, heavenly beings who possessed superhuman spiritual power, and who were known as Bodhisattvas . . . . In both senses of the word religion (belief in spiritual beings and belief in the sacred), the Bodhisattva school of Buddhism . . . was a religious system . . . . For Mahayana Buddhism the sacred has its special focus in the heavenly realm where dwell the Bodhisattvas, the superhuman spiritual beings who are said to exert their influence to help poor struggling mortals. In directing their attention to this supramundane heavenly community the Mahayanists showed themselves correspondingly less concerned with the need to order the earthly society of men in such a way that would facilitate the pursuit of the Buddhist life, and would enhance and encourage human effort. More reliance on heavenly power meant that less attention needed to be given to earthly factors. The Mahayanists became more concerned with devotions to the heavenly beings, with ritual and speculation, and less with the nature of the civilization in which they lived.

See also pp. 202-203, 242-247.

both of which articles I am considerably indebted. See also my own unpublished paper “The Earliest Chinese Translations of Mahāyāna Buddhist Sūtras: Some Notes on the Works of Lokakṣema”.

4. T. = Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaikyoku, eds., Taishō shinshū daiizōkyō, 100 vols. (Tokyo, 1924-35). Throughout this paper references to the texts will be to page, lateral column and line of the Taishō edition, except in the case of No. 8, the Kāśyapa-parivarta, where citations will be according to the sections of von Stäel-Holstein’s edition.

5. On the epigraphical evidence, which tends to corroborate one of the findings of the present paper, see G. Schopen, “Mahāyāna in Indian Inscriptions”, Indo-Iranian Journal, 21 (1979) pp. 1-19.

6. These phonetic transcriptions (biqiu biqiumi, etc.), which later became standard in Chinese translations of Buddhist sūtras, are used throughout our group of texts, except that in Redaction B of the PraS upāsaka is also rendered as qingxinsiḥab (“man of pure faith”) and upāsikā as qingxinniḥbb (“woman of pure faith”), while non-standard translations of all four terms are found in CGD and UP.

7. Lokakṣema’s use of qiū (“seek”) before his transcription of mahāyāna-samprasthita is redundant but revealing (since it puts women one step further back from full participation), otherwise the accuracy of his translation is confirmed by the Tibetan text of the PraS, 10A and 12A: theg-pa chen-po-la yang-dag-par zhugs-pa’i dge-slong-ma (or dge-bsnyen-ma).


9. In Chap. XIX of the Sanskrit text of the AsPP this figure appears as Gaṅgadevā or Gaṅgadevī Bhaginī, i.e. “the woman Gaṅgadevi”. Although E. Conze in his English translation of the sūtra (op. cit., pp. 219-221) calls her a ‘Goddess’ or ‘Goddess of the Ganges’, a lead which D. Paul follows in her version of the passage (op. cit., pp. 180-184), this woman is no more a goddess than Āryadeva is a god. Gaṅgadevi’s story, however, later produced some interesting echoes, when the AsPP’s prediction that she would attain awakening as a male was frustrated, as it were, by the Tibetan tradition. The rnam-thar of Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal (757-817), one of the chief consorts of Padmasambhava, lists Gaṅgadevi as one of the previous incarnations of that famous Tibetan yoginī: see K. Dowman, Sky Dancer ( Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984), p. 6 and Tarthang Tulku, Mother of Knowledge (Dharma Publishing, Berkeley, 1983), p. 11 (both translators appear to perpetuate the erroneous divinisation, but I have not been able to check the Tibetan text myself). Since Ye-shes mtsho-rgyal is similarly identified with the unnamed merchant’s daughter who befriends the bodhisattva Sadāprarudita in Chaps. XXX-XXXI of the AsPP, the author of the rnam-thar is clearly attempting to link her with Prajñāpāramitā herself.

10. See AsPP 427b29-c2, c27, 429b6-7 for occurrences of this term with bodhisattva and mahāsannāha-samnaddha.


12. See e.g., Robinson and Johnson, op.cit., p. 78.
This point is, in my view, not invalidated by the existence of such passages as KP 88, which claims that just as the new moon is more worthy of homage (namashāra) than the full, so too bodhisattvas are more worthy of homage than the Buddhas. When taken in context, this hyperbolic glorification of the bodhisattva-path can hardly be construed as a ‘call to worship’.

For different renderings of some of these grades, see UP 16a6–8.

Spiro’s understanding of the bodhisattva-ideal as one which “permits salvation to be achieved by a mechanical process—the transfer of merit from Bodhisattva to devotee” and “demands no personality transformation” (op. cit., p. 62) is, as we have seen, wide of the mark, at least as far as the early Mahāyāna is concerned. The supposed “misreadings” of the bodhisattva doctrine which he imputes to the Burmese (see esp. p. 63, n. 33) are perfectly compatible with our early sūtras.

CHINESE GLOSSARY

a. 道行般若經  
ab. 開士去家為(修)道  
ac. 明士除惡  
ad. 去家  
ae. 在家
af. 居家  
ag. 白衣  
ah. 善男子 善女人
ai. 恒竭  
aj. 小道  
ak. 斎支佛  
al. 因緣覺佛  
am. 緣覺  
an. 聲聞  
ao. 弟子  
ap. (阿)羅漢  
aq. 阿羅漢道  
ar. 凡人  
as. 須陀洹  
at. 斯陀含  
au. 阿那含  
av. 外道  
aw. 餘道  
ax. 異道  
ay. 邪道  
az. 人  
ba. 清信士  
bb. 清信女