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THE PROBLEM
OF BECOMING A
BODHISATTVA
AND THE EMERGENCE
OF MAHĀYĀNA

An old presupposition in scholarship on the figure of the bodhisattva is that becoming one was regarded as a matter of personal choice. For much of the twentieth century, scholars envisioned Mahāyāna as having arisen from a new spirit of altruism that inspired Buddhists to become bodhisattvas for the benefit of others.¹ More recently, Jan Nattier has argued that Mahāyāna emerged from Buddhists adopting the bodhisattva path as a “vocational alternative.”² Peter Skilling has suggested that according to “the available

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¹ This idea was first proposed by T. W. Rhys Davids and later developed by Jean Przyluski, who additionally claimed that the altruistic spirit emerged among laypeople reacting against monastics. Przyluski’s version of the theory was later popularized by Étienne Lamotte and became the dominant theory on the emergence of Mahāyāna for several decades. See primarily T. W. Rhys Davids, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Some Points in the History of Indian Buddhism* (London, 1881), 254–55, and *Buddhism: Its History and Literature*, 3rd rev. ed. (1896; New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1909), 200–205; J. Przyluski, *La légende de l’empereur Aśoka (Aśoka-avadāna) dans les textes indiens et chinois* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1923), 203–4, and *Le bouddhisme* (Paris: Rieder, 1932), 46–50; Étienne Lamotte, “Sur la formation du Mahāyāna,” in *Asiatica: Festschrift Friedrich Weller zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Johannes Schubert and Ulrich Schneider (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1954), 378–79, and *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse* (Louvain: Université de Louvain, Institut orientaliste, 1944–80), 3:xxvi–xxvii. For a discussion, see also David Drewes, “Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism I: Recent Scholarship,” *Religion Compass* 4, no. 2 (2010): 55.

² Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path according to “The Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā)”* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003), 8, 174 n. 6, 195–96.

scriptures of . . . the Śrāvaka schools and a good many Mahāyāna sūtras,” “it is up to the individual to decide whether to become an arhat, . . . pratyeka-buddha, or . . . [Buddha], and to then pursue the appropriate path.”³ For ancient Buddhists, however, and still today in Theravāda, becoming a bodhisattva was not something one could simply decide to do. According to the oldest known understanding, one becomes a bodhisattva by making a resolution to attain Buddhahood in the presence of a living Buddha and receiving his prediction that one will succeed. Even with the emergence of more developed models, in all known *nikāya* traditions, and apparently also early Mahāyāna, the presence of a living Buddha was seen as a necessary condition for entering the path, and a Buddha’s prediction was seen as necessary to have confidence in one’s destiny. Since there was no Buddha currently alive in the world, these possibilities were closed. While certain individual Buddhists may have developed some tentative ways of working around this problem prior to the emergence of Mahāyāna sūtras, the authors of these texts made use of a bold strategy for attributing bodhisattva status to their followers, which made it possible for a coherent bodhisattva tradition to emerge.

The oldest known account of how one becomes a bodhisattva is found in the story of the future Buddha’s encounter, eons ago, with the Buddha Dīpaṃkara.⁴ Although some of the details vary in its surviving versions, the basic story is well known: As a young brahman renunciant, or student, named Sumedha, Megha, or Sumati, the future Buddha offered lotus flowers to Dīpaṃkara and spread out his hair, or whole body, for him to walk on. He resolved to one day become a Buddha himself, and Dīpaṃkara predicted that, eons hence, he would become the Buddha Gotama (Skt. Gautama), or Śākyamuni.⁵ While

³ Peter Skilling, “Vaidalya, Mahāyāna, and Bodhisattva in India: An Essay towards Historical Understanding,” in *The Bodhisattva Ideal: Essays on the Emergence of Mahāyāna*, ed. Bhikkhu Nyanatusita (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2013), 82. For similar views, see, e.g., Paul Harrison, “Who Gets to Ride in the Great Vehicle? Self-Image and Identity among the Followers of the Early Mahāyāna,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 10, no. 1 (1987): 80; Anālayo, *The Genesis of the Bodhisattva Ideal* (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2010), 131–32, and “The Hīnayāna Fallacy,” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 6 (2014): 9–31; Jonathan A. Silk, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., s.v. “Mahāyāna.”

⁴ On the primacy of the Dīpaṃkara story, which has long been generally recognized in scholarship, see Vincent Tournier, *La formation du “Mahāvastu” et la mise en place des conceptions relatives à la carrière du “bodhisattva”* (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient, 2017), 103, 108, 131–32, 140, 143, 175, 613–14. Anālayo has argued that an older tradition held that Śākyamuni first vowed to attain Buddhahood under the Buddha Kāśyapa (*Genesis*, 84–93), but this is almost certainly incorrect, as Tournier points out (*La formation*, 151–56).

⁵ I refer to this Buddha as Gotama for Pāli sources and Śākyamuni for others, following the general usage of the texts. On different versions of the Dīpaṃkara story, see the recent studies of Junko Matsumura, primarily “The *Sumedhakathā* in Pāli Literature and Its Relation to the Northern Buddhist Textual Tradition,” *Journal of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies* 14 (2010): 101–33, “The Story of the Dīpaṃkara Buddha Prophecy in Northern Buddhist Texts: An Attempt at Classification,” *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies* 59, no. 3 (2011): 63–72, and “The Formation and Development of the Dīpaṃkara Prophecy Story:

scholars have long seen this story as presenting an option that Buddhists believed they could adopt for themselves,⁶ Buddhist authors focused on the fact that the future Buddha made his resolution and received a prediction in the presence of a living Buddha and identified these as formal requirements necessary for any would-be bodhisattva to fulfill. Although different traditions extended it in various ways, all known models of the path to Buddhahood developed from this basic understanding.

Beginning with *nikāya* models, which tend to be clearer than what we find in Mahāyāna texts, the foundational text on the bodhisattva path for Theravāda tradition is the late canonical *Buddhavaṃsa*, which depicts Gotama's path to Buddhahood beginning with his encounter with Dīpaṅkara.⁷ The text states that after making a resolution (*abhinīhāra*) to attain Buddhahood and receiving Dīpaṅkara's prediction, since Buddhas only speak the truth, he became certain (*dhuva*) to attain Buddhahood. He then took four *asaṃkheyyas* and a hundred thousand shorter *kappas* (Skt. *asaṃkhyeya*, *kalpa*) to complete the path, during which he encountered and served twenty-three other Buddhas.⁸ Although the

The *Ārya-dīpaṅkaravyākaraṇa-nāma-mahāyānasūtra* and Its Relation to Other Versions," *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies* 60, no. 3 (2012): 80–89.

⁶ See, e.g., Rhys Davids, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, 200–205 (cf. T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist Birth Stories; or, Jātaka Tales: The Oldest Collection of Folk-Lore Extant; Being the Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, vol. 1 [1878; repr., London, 1880], 12 n. 1); Przyluski, *Le bouddhisme*, 48; Edward J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1933), 7, 169; Constantin Regamey, *Der Buddhismus indiens* (1951; repr., Aschaffenburg: Paul Pattloch, 1964), 66–67; Lamotte, "Sur la formation," 378–79, and *Le traité*, 3:xxvi–xxvii; A. L. Basham, "The Evolution of the Concept of the Bodhisattva," in *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhism*, ed. Leslie S. Kawamura (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1981), 27; Tilmann E. Vetter, "A Comparison between the Mysticism of the Older Prajñāpāramitā Literature and the Mysticism of the Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikās of Nāgārjuna," *Acta Indologica* 6 (1984): 504; Nattier, *Few Good Men*, 144–51. Though Rhys Davids's precise phrasing suggests that he may have understood that one could not become a bodhisattva by choice, his presentation intimates this and seems to have had a decisive influence on later scholars. Eugène Burnouf presented a clearer understanding a few decades earlier: "L'homme qui se sent le désir de parvenir à cet état, ne peut y atteindre par les seuls efforts de sa volonté; il faut qu'il ait, pendant de nombreuses existences, mérité la faveur d'un ou de plusieurs de ces anciens . . . Buddhas" (*Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien*, vol. 1 [Paris, 1844], 110).

⁷ On the date and composition of the *Buddhavaṃsa*, see, e.g., Jonathan S. Walters, "Stūpa, Story, and Empire: Constructions of the Buddha Biography in Early Post-Aśokan India," in *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Juliane Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press: 1997), 181–82 n. 12; Steven Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities: Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (1998; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 257; Tournier, *La formation*, 146–50. Bhāviveka's *Tarkajvālā* attributes a **Dvādasasahasabuddhavaṃsa* to the Abhayagiri-vāsins, suggesting that this branch of the Theravāda tradition transmitted a different version of the text than the Mahāvihāra version we possess today. On this, see Peter Skilling, "A Citation from the **Buddhavaṃsa* of the Abhayagiri School," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 18 (1993): 165–75; Malcolm David Eckel, trans. and ed., *Bhāviveka and His Buddhist Opponents* (Cambridge, MA: Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University, 2008), 351/169–70.

⁸ N. A. Jayawickrama, ed., *Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpīṭaka* (1974; repr., Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1995), 9–21/translation available in I. B. Horner, trans., *The Minor Anthologies of*

text does not mention specific stages he followed or apply his timeframe to bodhisattvas in general, it presents a list of eight conditions, apparently found only in Theravāda texts, necessary to make a valid resolution to attain Buddhahood, one of which is that it must be made in the presence of a living Buddha (*satthāradassana*).⁹ Though the idea seems implicit in the *Buddhavaṃsa* itself, in his perhaps sixth-century *Cariyāpīṭaka* commentary, Dhammapāla states that one does not become a bodhisattva (Pāli *bodhisatta*) until one makes a valid resolution, which makes one “irreversible” (*anivattana*) from the attainment of Buddhahood, a view maintained by Theravāda commentators to the present day.¹⁰

the Pali Canon, Part III: Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavaṃsa) and Basket of Conduct (Cariyāpīṭaka) (1975; repr., Lancaster: Pali Text Society, 2007), 9–25. This figure is also found in the *Milindapañha* (V. Trenckner, ed., *The Milindapañha, Being Dialogues between King Milinda and the Buddhist Sage Nāgasena* [1880], repr. in V. Trenckner and Padmanabh S. Jaini, eds., *The Milindapañho with Milinda-ṭīkā* [Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997], 287/translation available in I. B. Horner, trans., *Milinda's Questions* [1963–64; repr., Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1996–99], 2.113) and *Nidānakathā* (V. Fausbøll, ed., *The Jātaka Together with Its Commentary, Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha* [1877–96; repr., London: Luzac, 1991–2006], 1.3/translation available in N. A. Jayawickrama, trans., *The Story of Gotama Buddha: The Nidāna-kathā of the Jātakaṭṭhakathā* [1990; repr., Oxford: Pali Text Society, 2002], 4). A verse clearly appended to the *Buddhavaṃsa* after its initial composition mentions three Buddhas that preceded Dīpaṃkara but does not link them to Gotama's path (Jayawickrama, *Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpīṭaka*, 100/ Horner, *Minor Anthologies*, 96). There seems not to have been any significant agreement on the length of an *asaṃkheyya*, or *asaṃkheyya kalpa*. See, e.g., Lamotte, *Le traité*, 1:247 and n. 1.

⁹ Jayawickrama, *Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpīṭaka*, 12/Horner, *Minor Anthologies*, 15. The other conditions are being human, being male, “cause” (*hetu*), being a renunciant, “attainment of qualities” (*guṇasampatti*), service (*adhikāra*), and desire (*chandaṭā*). For interpretations of these conditions, see the early commentaries on the *Suttanipāta* and *Buddhavaṃsa* (Helmer Smith, ed., *Sutta-nipāta Commentary, Being Paramatthajotikā II*, vol. 1, *Uragavagga Cūlavagga* [1916; repr., Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1989], 48–49; I. B. Horner, ed., *Madhurattavilāsini Nāma Buddhavaṃsattṭhakathā of Bhaddantācariya Buddhaddatta Mahāthera* [1946; repr., London: Pali Text Society, 1978], 91–92/translation available in I. B. Horner, trans., *The Clarifier of the Sweet Meaning (Madhurattavilāsini): Commentary on the Chronicle of Buddhas (Buddhavaṃsa) by Buddhaddatta Thera* [London: Pali Text Society, 1978], 132–34) and, e.g., D. L. Barua, ed., *Achariya Dhammapāla's Paramatthadīpanī, Being the Commentary on the Cariyā-pīṭaka* (1939; repr., London: Pali Text Society, 1979), 282–84/translation available in Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views: The Brahmajāla Sutta and Its Commentarial Exegesis* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1978), 262–64.

¹⁰ Barua, *Achariya Dhammapāla's Paramatthadīpanī*, 284/Bodhi, *Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views*, 265. On Dhammapāla's date, see Rupert Gethin, “Was Buddhaghosa a Theravādin? Buddhist Identity in the Pali Commentaries and Chronicles,” in *How Theravāda Is Theravāda? Exploring Buddhist Identities*, ed. Peter Skilling, Jason A. Carbine, Claudio Cicuzza, and Santi Pakdeekham (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 2012), 17 n. 37. For modern assertions of this view, see Narada Thera, *The Bodhisatta Ideal* (1931; repr., Colombo: Lorenz, 1963), 6; Ledi Sayādaw, *A Manual of the Perfections: Pāramī Dīpanī*, trans. U Tin Oo and ed. Bhikkhu Pesala, rev. ed. (2015; n.p.: Association for Insight Meditation, 2020), 30, 39, <http://www.aimwell.org/perfections.html>; Mingun Sayadaw, *The Great Chronicle of Buddhas*, trans. U Ko Lay, U Tin Lwin, and U Tin Oo (Yangon: Ti-Ni Publishing, 1991–98), 1.2.21–22; U Nu, *U Nu: Saturday's Son*, trans. U Law Yone and ed. U Kyaw Win (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 48–49.

Theravāda texts composed after the *Buddhavaṃsa* develop a more complicated picture. According to the *Suttanipāta* commentary, traditionally attributed to Buddhaghosa, and Dhammapāla's commentaries on the *Cariyāpiṭaka* and other texts, bodhisattvas can be divided into three types, each requiring a different length of time to attain Buddhahood. Only bodhisattvas, such as the future Gotama, who are "preponderant in wisdom" (*paññādhika*) complete the path in the *Buddhavaṃsa*'s timeframe of four *asaṃkheyyas* and a hundred thousand *kappas*. Bodhisattvas "preponderant in faith" (*saddhādhika*) and "preponderant in vigor" (*vīriyādhika*) take roughly twice and four times as long respectively.¹¹ A later model, dating to at least the twelfth or thirteenth century, but perhaps significantly earlier, found in the *Jinakālamālī* and other texts, divides the path into three stages, corresponding to progressively more concrete resolutions (*paṭthanā*, *pañidhāna*): mental (*manasā*), verbal (*vacī-*), and bodily and verbal (*kāyavacī-*). According to this model, for Gotama, the period covered by the *Buddhavaṃsa*, from his meeting with Dīpaṃkara to his attainment of Buddhahood, represents only the third of these stages. The first lasted for seven *asaṃkheyyas*, beginning with the future Gotama silently making a mental resolution to attain Buddhahood in the presence of the Buddha Brahmadeva, and the second lasted for nine, beginning with his making a verbal resolution, but not yet receiving a prediction, in the presence of a previous Buddha named Sakyamuni (Skt. Śākyamuni). According to the *Jinakālamālī*, he had his first arising of the thought of becoming a Buddha (*paṭhamacittupāda*) eons before he made his first resolution under Brahmadeva, but the text states that this event is not technically considered part of his path to Buddhahood because it took place outside of a Buddha's presence (*buddhadassanavirahita*).¹²

¹¹ Smith, *Sutta-nipāta Commentary*, 47; Barua, *Acharya Dhammapāla's Paramatthadīpanī*, 329/Bodhi, *Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views*, 325; and, e.g., F. L. Woodward, ed., *Paramattha-dīpanī Theragāthā-atthakathā*, by Dhammapāla (1940; repr., London: Pali Text Society, 1971), 10–11.

¹² A. P. Buddhadatta, ed., *Jinakālamālī*, by Ratanapañña (n.p.: Pali Text Society, 1962), 2–20/translation available in N. A. Jayawickrama, trans., *The Sheaf of Garlands of the Epochs of the Conqueror, Being a Translation of Jinakālamālīpakaraṇam*, of Ratanapañña Thera of Thailand (1968; repr., London: Pali Text Society, 1978), 2–30. The *Jinakālamālī* is the only premodern text advocating this model that I have consulted directly, most of the others existing only in manuscript. For a discussion of the date of this model, and other texts that present it, see Peter Skilling, "The Sambuddhe Verses and Later Theravādin Buddhology," *Journal of the Pali Text Society* 22 (1996): 161–64. For a study of the *Sotatthakīmāhānidāna*, one earlier text that presents this model, see Karen Anne Derris, "Virtue and Relationships in a Theravādin Biography of the Bodhisatta: A Study of the *Sotatthakīmāhānidāna*" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2000). An interesting presentation is also found in the 1774 Poudaung inscription of the Burmese king Hsinbyushin (Sein Ko Taw, "A Preliminary Study of the Po:u:daung Inscription of S'inbyuyin, 1774 A.D.," *Indian Antiquary* 22 [1893]: 3). Dhammapāla makes a brief reference to a belief in a three-period bodhisattva path associated with mental, verbal, and bodily resolutions (*citta-*, *vacī-*, and *kāyapañidhi*) in his *Cariyāpiṭaka* commentary, suggesting that this model may have old roots (Barua, *Acharya Dhammapāla's Paramatthadīpanī*, 321/Bodhi, *Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views*, 313).

Sarvāstivāda thinkers developed a similar model. The *Mahāvibhāṣā* and *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* state that Śākyamuni's path required three *asaṃkhyeya kalpas* and ninety-one shorter *kalpas* to complete, and began with his making a resolution (*prañidhāna*) to attain Buddhahood in the presence of the previous Buddha Śākyamuni without receiving a prediction.¹³ After this, he encountered and served 75,000 Buddhas in the first *asaṃkhyeya kalpa* and 76,000 in the second, at the end of which he encountered Dīpaṃkara and received his first prediction (*vyākaraṇa*) to Buddhahood. He then served 77,000 more Buddhas in the third *asaṃkhyeya*, and five more during the final ninety-one *kalpas* preceding his attainment of Buddhahood, during which he performed the meritorious deeds that enabled him to manifest the so-called thirty-two marks of a great man (*mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇa*). Mirroring this vision, Sarvāstivāda thinkers held that the path to Buddhahood typically requires three *asaṃkhyeya kalpas* and a hundred subsidiary *kalpas*.¹⁴ For the first two *asaṃkhyeya kalpas*, one is still likely to abandon or fall away from the path. At the end of the second *asaṃkhyeya kalpa*, one encounters the Buddha who makes one's first prediction, at which point one becomes certain that one will attain Buddhahood.¹⁵ According to Sarvāstivāda understanding, however, one does not technically become a bodhisattva even at this point. This only happens after the completion of the third *asaṃkhyeya kalpa*, when one begins to perform the deeds that lead to the acquisition of the marks of a great man.¹⁶ In his *Sphuṭārthā* commentary on the *Abhidharmakośa*, Yaśomitra, apparently presenting a Sautrāntika view, states that Śākyamuni did not technically become a bodhisattva until the lifetime in which he attained Buddhahood, when, as a youth, he entered the first *dhyāna* sitting at the foot of a jambu tree.¹⁷

¹³ The *Mahāvibhāṣā*, as quoted and summarized by Lamotte, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, and *Abhidharmadīpa* commentary agree in the points presented here; Lamotte, *Le traité*, 1:245–49; P. Pradhan, ed., *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*, 2nd rev. ed. (1967; repr., Patna: K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute, 2009), 265–67/translation available in Louis de La Vallée Poussin, trans., *L'Abhidharmakośa de Vasubandhu* (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1923–31), 3.220–28; Padmanabh S. Jaini, ed., *Abhidharmadīpa with Vibhāṣāprabhāvr̥tti*, 2nd ed. (1959; Patna: Kashi Prasad Jayaswal Research Institute, 1977), 199–200.

¹⁴ Śākyamuni is said to have been able to skip nine of the final hundred *kalpas* because of his exceptional *vīrya*, or vigor. See Lamotte, *Le traité*, 1:252–54, 252 n. 1, 254 n. 1, and the sources cited there.

¹⁵ Lamotte, *Le traité*, 1:247; cf. *Hōbōgirin: Dictionnaire encyclopédique du bouddhisme d'après les sources chinoises et japonaises*, fasc. 1/2, ed. Sylvain Lévi, J. Takakusu, and Paul Demiéville (Tokyo: Maison Franco-Japonaise, 1929–30), s.v. “Bosatsu.”

¹⁶ The *Abhidharmadīpa* commentary argues that this view is consistent with the claim that one can be called a bodhisattva after giving rise to the “irreversible thought [of attaining Buddhahood]” or the “irreversible arising of bodhicitta” (*avivartyaṃ cittam, avivartya bodhicittotpāda*), which is also found in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (Jaini, *Abhidharmadīpa*, 185–86). For this claim in the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, see Peter James Gilks, “No Turning Back: The Concept of Irreversibility in Indian Mahāyāna Literature” (PhD diss., Australian National University, 2010), 42.

¹⁷ Unrai Wogihara, ed., *Sphuṭārthā Abhidharmakośavyākhyā*, by Yaśomitra (1932–36; repr., Tokyo: Sankibo Buddhist Book Store, 1989), 320–21.

The Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinayavastu* presents a similar model, according to which Śākyamuni's path began with his making a resolution (**prañidhāna*) in the presence of the former Buddha Śākyamuni without receiving a prediction, and required three *asaṃkhyeya kalpas* to complete, during which he served 75,000, 76,000, and 77,000 Buddhas. It differs from the Sarvāstivāda model mainly in omitting the final ninety-one *kalpas* and in locating the future Śākyamuni's encounter with Dīpaṃkara at the beginning, rather than the end, of the second *asaṃkhyeya kalpa*. The text also adds that he had his first thought of attaining Buddhahood (**prathamacittotpāda*) prior to making his first resolution under the previous Śākyamuni, when he was born as King Prabhāsa, at a time when no Buddha was alive in the world. Much like the later Theravāda *Jinakālamālī*, however, it clearly depicts this as a preliminary to his entering the path, excluding it from its specification of the length of time he required to complete it.¹⁸

The *Mahāvastu*, a surviving portion of the *vinaya* of the Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādins, divides the bodhisattva path into four stages (*caryā*): the natural (*prakṛti*-), resolution (*prañidhāna*-), continuing (*anuloma*-), and irreversible (*anivartana*-).¹⁹ In the natural stage, bodhisattvas enter the path by

¹⁸ This is a summary of 'Dul ba, Kha, 273a–279a. Unless noted, all references to Tibetan texts are to the Derge edition (*bKa' 'gyur sDe dge par ma*, 103 vols. in PDF and TIFF files on hard drive [New York: Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center, 2003]). On the *Vinayavastu*'s model, see also Dorji Wangchuk, *The Resolve to Become a "Buddha": A Study of the "Bodhicitta" Concept in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies, 2007), 101. For a German translation of the text's version of the Prabhāsa story by Losang Jampa Panglung, see Dieter Schlingloff, "König Prabhāsa und der Elefant," *Indologica Taurinensia* 5 (1977): 141–49. The story is also mentioned in the *Dazhidu lun* and *Abhidharmadīpa* commentary (Lamotte, *Le traité*, 2:751; Jaini, *Abhidharmadīpa*, 201). On this story, see also Wangchuk, *Resolve*, 95–96, and the sources cited there; as well as Michael Hahn, trans. and ed., "How It All Began: The Very Beginning of the Buddha's Bodhisattva Career: I. Haribhaṭṭa's Version of the Prabhāsa Legend," *Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies, Sri Lanka* 4 (2006): 1–81; Mitsuyo Demoto, trans., "How It All Began (II): The Prabhāsa Legends of the Xianyujing," *Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies, Sri Lanka* 7 (2009): 1–20; Michael Hahn, trans. and ed., "How It All Began (III): Gopadatta's Version of the Prabhāsa Legend," *Journal of the Centre for Buddhist Studies, Sri Lanka* 7 (2009): 21–71; Michael Hahn, "Ein neuer Handschriftenfund aus Nepal und seine Konsequenzen für die Gopadatta-Hypothese," *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 27 (2010): 71–140.

¹⁹ For the material presented here, see the new edition and translation by Tournier (*La formation*, 405–10/475–76 and 419–50/480–93; cf. É. Senart, ed., *Le Mahāvastu* [Paris, 1882–97], 1.1–2, 46–63/translation available in J. J. Jones, trans., *The Mahāvastu* [1949–56; repr., London: Pali Text Society, 1976–87], 1.1–2, 39–52). The text depicts the events that take place in the *prakṛticaryā* inconsistently, stating several times that bodhisattvas do not give rise to the thought of attaining Buddhahood in this stage, but then depicting both Maitreya and Śākyamuni as having done so. The *Mahāvastu*'s well-known, though largely incoherent, ten-stage model is clearly a late addition to the text inspired by Mahāyāna sources. Tournier argues that it was added as an appendix between the fourth and sixth centuries (*La formation*, 110–22). The *Mahāvastu*'s four-*caryā* model is based on an older four-*caryā* model that located the beginning of Śākyamuni's career in the time of Dīpaṃkara, a version of which is partially preserved in

planting their first roots of merit (*kuśalamūla*) in the presence of a Buddha and later form a mental desire to attain Buddhahood. In the resolution stage, they make their first resolution to attain Buddhahood in the presence of a Buddha, without yet receiving a prediction. After passing through the continuing stage, the nature of which the text does not make clear, they meet the Buddha who gives them their first prediction in the irreversible stage, making their future attainment of Buddhahood certain. Though the text does not make use of a scheme of a specific number of *asaṃkhyeya kalpas*, it states that Śākyamuni entered the natural stage by planting his first roots of merit under the Buddha Aparājitaḍhvaja “immeasurable, *asaṃkhyeya kalpas*” ago, made his first resolution under the previous Buddha Śākyamuni, and received his first prediction from Dīpaṃkara.

Despite their differences, these texts envision the path to Buddhahood in much the same way. They each present it as beginning with the fulfillment of certain conditions in the presence of a living Buddha: making a resolution and receiving a prediction (early Theravāda texts), making a resolution without receiving a prediction (Sarvāstivāda texts, Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinayavastu*), forming a mental resolution (late Theravāda texts), or planting roots of merit (*Mahāvastu*). *Nikāya* texts also agree in depicting one’s eventual attainment of Buddhahood as remaining uncertain until one receives a Buddha’s prediction. Theravāda authors hold that one cannot properly be called a bodhisattva until this point, Sarvāstivāda authors hold that one only becomes a bodhisattva in the very final stage of the path, and Yaśomitra holds that this only happens in the final lifetime in which one attains Buddhahood.

Since there is no Buddha currently alive in the world, each of these models thus depicts it as being impossible for anyone to become a bodhisattva or enter the path to Buddhahood in this life. Some authors emphasized this explicitly. The Theravāda *Nidānakathā* rejects the possibility of using a substitute for the presence of a living Buddha, stating that resolutions made at a stūpa or bodhi tree after the Buddha’s death are invalid.²⁰ The *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpiṭaka* commentaries expand on this, adding that resolutions made before images, *pratyekabuddhas*, and *śrāvakas* are also ineffective. The former explains that this is because only Buddhas have the requisite knowledge to make a reliable prediction.²¹ The Sarvāstivāda *Mahāvibhāṣā* states that its discussion of the

manuscript fragments of the Gāndhārī **Bahubudhaga Sutra*, which have been carbon-dated to roughly the first century BCE. See Richard Salomon, *The Buddhist Literature of Ancient Gandhāra: An Introduction with Selected Translations* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2018), 265–93; Tournier, *La formation*, 129–43, 196–201.

²⁰ Fausbøll, *Jātaka*, 1.14/Jayawickrama, *Story of Gotama*, 19. On this, see also n. 27.

²¹ Horner, *Madhurattavilāsinī*, 91–92/*Clarifier of the Sweet Meaning*, 133; Barua, *Acharya Dhammapāla’s Paramatthadīpanī*, 282/Bodhi, *Discourse on the All-Embracing Net of Views*, 263.

bodhisattva is intended in part to “stop those who are in fact not bodhisattvas from giving rise to the self-conceit that they are.”²²

Resolutions made for the first time in this life were held in low account because they were seen as most likely to fail or be abandoned. The influential modern Burmese monk Ledi Sayadaw (1846–1923) presents a traditional perspective:

These days there are some who wish for Buddhahood . . . though their conduct barely qualifies them to become ordinary disciples. What characterizes them is the bold banner of craving-dependent deeds, which cry out for public recognition right now and yearn for glorious results hereafter. . . . Small plants thrive just in the rainy season. Only one in a thousand or ten thousand among them might survive the long, dry, hot months till the next rainy season. . . . [Similarly] whatever little perfection [an aspiring bodhisattva] has achieved during [the period when the Buddha’s teachings survive in the world] has very little chance of surviving to be developed in the time of the next Buddha. Those . . . deeds of merit will certainly lose their potential once the teaching has disappeared. Very few could survive the uncertainties of the intervening dark ages. During those dark ages, right view is lost to humanity and wrong views prevail. One who has acquired only sham deeds of merit falls into wrong views, and so their little potential of merit is soon gone.²³

Though it is easy to make merit while the Buddha’s teachings survive in the world, after they disappear—according to Theravāda doctrine a bit less than 2,500 years from now—doing so will become very difficult. If one were simply to form a desire to attain Buddhahood and perhaps dedicate some merit to its attainment in this life, one would almost certainly go astray before the appearance of the next Buddha, Metteyya (Skt. Maitreya), much less be able to complete the eons-long path. The sayadaw later continues: “Until an aspirant to Buddhahood receives formal recognition and assurance from a living Buddha, the aspiration is still in danger. For the aspirant is still susceptible to wrong views, which are the antithesis of enlightenment. One’s life as a bodhisatta is thereby destroyed, and so one reverts to being an ordinary person.”²⁴ The *Dazhidu lun*, a commentary on the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*

²² Yoshimichi Fujita, “The Bodhisattva Thought of the Sarvāstivādins and Mahāyāna Buddhism,” *Acta Asiatica* 96 (2009): 107; cf. *Hōbōgirin*, s.v. “Bosatsu.”

²³ Ledi Sayādaw, *A Manual of the Excellent Man, Uttamapurisa Dīpanī*, ed. Bhikkhu Pesala, trans. U Tin Oo (2000; repr., Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2007), 24–25.

²⁴ Ledi Sayādaw, *Manual of the Excellent Man*, 88. The sayadaw here uses the term *bodhisatta* loosely in reference to someone who has not yet made a valid resolution to attain Buddhahood and received a Buddha’s prediction. He elsewhere affirms, however, following Dhammapāla’s *Cariyāpiṭaka* commentary (see above), that one can only properly be called a *bodhisatta* after receiving a Buddha’s prediction (*Manual of the Perfections*, 30, 39). Nārada Thera explains that the term *bodhisattva* “is generally applied to anyone who is striving for Enlightenment, but in the strictest sense of the term, should be applied only to those who are destined to become supremely enlightened Ones” (*Bodhisatta Ideal*, 6).

composed by an Indian or Central Asian monk with a Sarvāstivāda background, makes a similar point, comparing those who form a desire to attain Buddhahood to fish eggs: Out of a vast number only a few become fish. The same text states that the Buddha's disciple Śāriputra pursued Buddhahood for sixteen *kalpas* before becoming frustrated and deciding to become an *arhat* instead.²⁵ The influential Thai forest monk Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta (1870–1949) reportedly claimed to have realized that a resolution to attain Buddhahood that he made in a past life was inhibiting his progress in meditation. Because fulfilling it “would take him aeons of wandering in the cycle of births and deaths, during which he should have to encounter and endure untold suffering,” he decided to abandon it and attain *arhatship* instead.²⁶

Although all known *nikāya* models of the path to Buddhahood depict it as being impossible to become a bodhisattva in this life, some Buddhists tried to work around this restriction. Theravāda texts that state that it is not possible to make a valid resolution before stūpas, bodhi trees, images, or *śrāvakas* suggest that some ancient Buddhists may have tried to do precisely this.²⁷ The *Mahāvibhāṣā* criticizes those “who, having given a single meal or [having given] a single robe or a single dwelling through to having given a single willow twig [for cleaning the teeth] or having observed a single precept or having recited a single verse . . . immediately give a lion's roar and make the following statement: ‘I shall on account of this certainly become a Buddha.’”²⁸ While not

²⁵ Lamotte, *Le traité*, 1:257, 2:701.

²⁶ Acharn Maha Boowa Nyanasampanno, *The Venerable Phra Acharn Mun Bhuridatta Thera: Meditation Master*, trans. Siri Buddhasukh (Bangkok: Mahamakut Rajavidyalaya, 1976), 12. The account states that Ajahn Mun was able to renounce his resolution “probably because it had not yet become strong enough to be irreversible,” that is, because he had not yet received a Buddha's prediction. On Ajahn Mun's resolution to attain Buddhahood, see also Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (1984; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 99–100.

²⁷ Tournier argues that the passage in the *Nidānakathā* was directed at Lankan Buddhists who traveled to Bodhi Gaya and made aspirations to Buddhahood there, but this is rather far-fetched (Vincent Tournier, “Mahākāśyapa, His Lineage, and the Wish for Buddhahood: Reading Anew the Bodhgayā Inscriptions of Mahānāman,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 57, no. 1–2 [2014]: 29–44). His argument depends on his translation of *bodhimūle* in the *Nidānakathā* passage as “near the bodhi-tree,” supplying the definite article, but there is nothing to suggest that the passage is referring to any specific tree. Bodhi trees are generally found at all Sri Lankan Buddhist temples, and, of course, there was also the great bodhi tree at Anurādhapura. In addition, the inscriptions that Tournier cites do not express resolutions but merely dedicate merit to the attainment of Buddhahood. Later Theravāda texts, at least, depict people dedicating merit to the attainment of Buddhahood long before becoming bodhisattvas (e.g., Buddhādatta, *Jinakālamālī*, 4–5/ Jayawickrama, *Sheaf of Garlands*, 5–7; Derris, “Virtue and Relationships,” 93–94). In a remarkable passage, the Mingun Sayadaw suggests that offering one's limbs or self-immolating in the presence of stūpas may enable one to become a bodhisattva in a future life (*Great Chronicle*, 1.1.62).

²⁸ Fujita, “Bodhisattva Thought,” 107; cf. *Hōbōgirin*, s.v. “Bosatsu.”

especially clear, this suggests that some may have attempted to identify as bodhisattvas by dedicating acts of merit to the attainment of Buddhahood.²⁹

Later Theravādins tried to work around the restriction on becoming a bodhisattva in this life in other ways. A fairly widely attested approach was to try to establish conditions that would enable one to be reborn in the time of the next Buddha, Metteyya, make a resolution in his presence, and receive a prediction from him. An aspiration to do this is expressed in a series of verses appended to the *Jātaka* commentary, which may have been added by a copyist, but which H. Saddhatissa suggests belongs to the original, perhaps fifth-century text.³⁰ Similar aims seem to have been common in Burma during the Pagan period. A twelfth-century inscription from Pagan reports King Alaungsithu's aspiration to fulfill the eight conditions for making a valid resolution in the presence of Maitreya and receive his prediction.³¹ Than Tun reports that other Pagan inscriptions record similar aspirations made by kings, ministers, and scholars, who "were all anxious" to "meet *Maitreya* to receive a prophecy from his very lips."³²

In more recent times, this strategy was adopted by the influential Buddhist firebrand Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) and by U Nu (1907–95), the first prime minister of post-independence Burma. Dharmapala stated his intention to attain Buddhahood publicly, and is widely regarded as having been a bodhisattva by Sri Lankan Buddhists today, but apparently believed that he had not yet received a prediction, writing in his diary, "I will take *vivarana* [= prediction] from the coming Buddha."³³ In a remarkable passage in his autobiography,

²⁹ It seems unlikely that the authors of these texts were responding to the practices of followers of early Mahāyāna sūtras. As we shall see, Mahāyāna sūtras do not encourage people to try to become bodhisattvas in this life and seem to share the general understanding that doing so is impossible. The *Avadānaśataka* tells stories of people making resolutions to attain Buddhahood on the basis of offerings of meals, robes, and other things, which could be related, but invariably depicts them doing so in the presence of Buddhas. See J. S. Speyer, ed., *Avadānaśataka: A Century of Edifying Tales Belonging to the Hinayāna* (1902–9; repr., The Hague: Mouton, 1958), 1–62, 112–18.

³⁰ Fausbøll, *Jātaka*, 6.594–96; H. Saddhatissa, trans. and ed., *The Birth-Stories of the Ten Bodhisattas and the Dasabodhisattuppattikathā, Being a Translation and Edition of the Dasabodhisattuppattikathā* (London: Pali Text Society, 1975), 38–39, 52 n. 42.

³¹ Pe Maung Tin and G. H. Luce, "The Shwegugyi Pagoda Inscription, Pagan, 1141 A.D.," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 10, no. 2 (1920): 73–74.

³² Than Tun, "Religion in Burma, A.D. 1000–1300," *Journal of the Burma Research Society* 42, no. 2 (1959): 53.

³³ Steven Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 48, and see also 62. On Dharmapala as a bodhisattva, see also Michael Roberts, "For Humanity. For the Sinhalese. Dharmapala as Crusading Bosat," *Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 4 (1997): 1006–32. For Dharmapala's own writings on the Dīpaṃkara story and the requirements of the bodhisattva path, see Anagarika Dharmapala, *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*, ed. Ananda Guruge (n.p.: Anagarika Dharmapala Birth Centenary Committee, Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, Ceylon, 1965), 91–92, 128–30, 161–65.

U Nu explains that his father encouraged him to vow to become a Buddha while he was a teenager:

Leading Maung Nu [U Nu's name as a boy] before the family altar, his father made him sit in a respectful manner before the images of the Buddha. He got him to worship the Three Noble Gems with humility. He recited the Five Precepts which Maung Nu repeated after him. Finally, with fingers joined in adoration, Maung Nu vowed . . . that he would dedicate himself to . . . the ten parami [Skt. *pāramitā*] . . . and prayed that he might one day become the true Buddha. . . . [His father] wept tears of joy. Just because Maung Nu had made the wish to become a Buddha, it did not necessarily follow that he would be one some day. Let alone becoming a Buddha, it would be no easy matter to find an existing Buddha and to get him to consecrate one as a paya-alaung [= bodhisattva]. Maung Nu's action had been taken on the spur of the moment, upon hearing his father's admonitions. As he found more time to reflect on the inevitability of death, old age, and separation, and the ceaseless rounds of cares and tribulations in the circle of endless rebirths he was frightened. Others before him . . . had abandoned the Buddha-wish and settled for the attainment of *a-ra-hat-ship*. . . . No one can say that Maung Nu, who had begun to entertain such grave fears, would not renounce the Buddha-wish.³⁴

U Nu knew and accepted the doctrine that he could not become a bodhisattva until he received a prediction from a Buddha but tried to set the process in motion by making a resolution before Buddha images on his home altar. Acknowledging that he was likely to give up his resolution before ever becoming a bodhisattva, he seems to have intended to close the gap by sheer force, performing extremely meritorious actions that would enable him to receive a prediction from a Buddha, presumably Maitreya, in a future life. Along with convening the sixth Buddhist council and making Buddhism the state religion of Burma, he banned the slaughter of cattle, an action that, according to traditional reasoning, would enable him to accumulate a vast amount of merit because the entire country's abstention from beef would proceed from his intention (*cetanā*). The anthropologist Ingrid Jordt reports that one monk told her "with real disdain that U Nu was merely interested in using the sangha and the state as a gigantic merit field within which he could attend to . . . [the] fulfillment of his bodhisattva vow."³⁵

An alternate approach for working around the impossibility of becoming a bodhisattva in this life is based on the possibility that one might already have become one in a past life. The influential Sri Lankan monk Nārada Thera (1898–1983) writes:

³⁴ U Nu, *U Nu: Saturday's Son*, 48–49.

³⁵ Ingrid Jordt, *Burma's Mass Lay Meditation Movement: Buddhism and the Cultural Construction of Power* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 198.

It might be asked: Is a Bodhisatta aware that he is aspiring to Buddhahood in the course of his rebirth? Sometimes he is, at times he is not. According to the Jātakas it appears that at times the Bodhisatta Gotama was fully cognizant of the fact that he was striving for Buddhahood. . . . In some births, as in the case of the Jotipala Mānavaka, he was . . . unaware of his high aspiration. . . . Hence, who knows that we ourselves are not Bodhisattas, who have dedicated our lives for the noble purpose of serving the world?³⁶

Following a similar line of reasoning, some Theravādins have claimed, or tried to determine, that they became bodhisattvas in past lives.³⁷ Several scholars have pointed out that Theravāda kings often presented themselves as bodhisattvas, up until very recent times.³⁸ In some cases, they explicitly claimed to have

³⁶ Nārada Thera, *The Buddha-dhamma; or, The Life and Teachings of the Buddha* (Panadura: Children of the Late Dr. and Mrs. C. P. de Fonseka, 1942), 327–28; cf. Narada, *Bodhisatta Ideal*, 40.

³⁷ A related practice involves speculating on the bodhisattva status of others. Over the years, Theravāda Buddhists have identified leading monks, such as Vāliṇṇa Saramāṇikara (1698–1778), Hikkaḍḍuvē Sumaṅgala (1827–1911), and Khruba Sriwichai (1878–1939), as well as political figures, such as S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike (1899–1959), Dudley Senanayake (1911–73), and Aung San Suu Kyi (1945–), as bodhisattvas. See Shanta Ratnayaka, “The Bodhisattva Ideal of Theravāda,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 8, no. 2 (1985): 94; Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999), 282–83, 341–42; Mikael Gravers, “Monks, Morality and Military: The Struggle for Moral Power in Burma—and Buddhism’s Uneasy Relation with Lay Power,” *Contemporary Buddhism* 13, no. 1 (2012): 10–11; Rory MacKenzie, *New Buddhist Movements in Thailand: Towards an Understanding of Wat Phra Dhammakāya and Santi Asoke* (London: Routledge, 2007), 155. Shanta Ratnayaka comments that in Sri Lanka, “when someone is compassionately and courageously engaged in good work, his neighbors begin to describe him as a bodhisattva. . . . The more difficult tasks he undertakes, the higher is the status of bodhisattvahood attributed to him” (“Bodhisattva Ideal,” 96). Aung San Suu Kyi denied that she was a bodhisattva in a 1995 interview, stating, “Oh, for goodness’ sake, I’m nowhere near such a state. And I’m amazed that people think I could be anything like that. I would love to become a *Bodhisattva* one day, if I thought I was capable of such heights. . . . But I’m not one who has made, or thought of myself as fit to make a *Bodhisattva* vow” (*The Voice of Hope: Conversations with Alan Clements* [London: Penguin, 1997], 9).

³⁸ See, e.g., Than Tun, “Religion in Burma,” 53; E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), 43–48, 59–67 (but cf. Collins, *Nirvana*, 381–82); Walpola Rahula, “L’idéal du bodhisattva dans le Theravāda et le Mahāyāna,” *Journal Asiatique* 259 (1971): 69; A. B. Griswold and Prasert ṇa Nagara, “The Epigraphy of Mahādharmarāja I of Sukhodaya: Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 11, Part I,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 61, no. 1 (1973): §§2, 5, 6, 7; William J. Koenig, *The Burmese Polity, 1752–1819: Politics, Administration, and Social Organization in the Early Kon-baung Period* (Ann Arbor: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1990), 74–79; Victor B. Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580–1760* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 70–71, 240–46, etc.; Ratnayaka, “Bodhisattva Ideal,” 94; Jeffrey Samuels, “The Bodhisattva Ideal in Theravāda Buddhist Theory and Practice: A Reevaluation of the Bodhisattva-Śrāvaka Opposition,” *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 3 (1997): 404–6; Michael W. Charney, *Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma’s Last Dynasty, 1752–1885* (Ann Arbor: Centers for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 2006), 75–76; Paul M. Handley, *The King Never Smiles: A Biography of Thailand’s Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

received predictions to Buddhahood in past lives.³⁹ Because kingship was regarded as proof of the possession of vast merit, and because *jātaka* stories often depict Gotama as having been a king in past lives, such claims had a certain inherent plausibility.

In other cases, Theravādins have tried to prove that they were already bodhisattvas by performing “acts of truth,” based on the idea, found in ancient narrative texts, that significant truths about oneself can be called upon to produce a miraculous response.⁴⁰ According to a fourteenth-century inscription from Sukhothai, the apparently royally sponsored monk *Srīsraddharājacūlāmūnī* performed two such truth-acts, declaring that a tree he planted should put out a shoot and that he should be able to find a seashell in a forest if he was a bodhisattva, both of which were successful.⁴¹ More recently, the leaders of esoteric Buddhist organizations that emerged in Burma in the 1950s and ’60s claimed to be bodhisattvas. The founder of the *Ariyā-weizzā* organization, recently studied by Niklas Foxeus, claimed to be the bodhisattva who will become the Buddha *Rāma*, believed destined to appear in our world next after Maitreya. Most male members of the organization also identify as having become bodhisattvas in past lives, apparently establishing, or verifying, their status by performing truth-acts to the effect that they should die immediately if this is not the case. Foxeus reports that a Theravāda monk belonging to the organization told him that he had been born human and become a monk because he had previously vowed “to enter into the human world five or six times to propagate [Buddhism] and save all beings before he attains buddhahood.”⁴²

Although early Mahāyāna sūtras predate most or all of the *nikāya* texts discussed here, they share a similar general understanding of the bodhisattva path, based primarily on the *Dīpaṃkara* story and an extension of this story into the past.⁴³ Mahāyāna texts apparently unanimously depict the path as beginning

³⁹ See, e.g., Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds*, 61; Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles*, 71, 268; Koenig, *Burmese Polity*, 76–78 (but cf. Jacques P. Leider, “A Kingship by Merit and Cosmic Investiture: An Investigation into King Alaungmintaya’s Self-Representation,” *Journal of Burma Studies* 15, no. 2 [2011]: 165–87); Samuels, “Bodhisattva Ideal,” 39.

⁴⁰ On acts of truth, see primarily Eugene Watson Burlingame, “The Act of Truth (Saccakiriya): A Hindu Spell and Its Employment as a Psychic Motif in Hindu Fiction,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, n.s., 49 (July 1917): 429–67. For a more recent discussion with a good bibliography, see George Thompson, “On Truth-Acts in Vedic,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 41, no. 2 (1998): 125–53.

⁴¹ A. B. Griswold and Prasert ṇa Nagara, “King Lōdaiya of Sukhodaya and His Contemporaries: Epigraphic and Historical Studies, No. 10,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 60, no. 1 (1972): 114, 122.

⁴² Niklas Foxeus, *The Buddhist World Emperor’s Mission: Millenarian Buddhism in Postcolonial Burma* (Stockholm: Department of Ethnology, History of Religions and Gender Studies, Stockholm University, 2011), 121–24, 127, 165–72, 225–30.

⁴³ The *Dīpaṃkara* story is mentioned frequently in early Mahāyāna sūtras. For some examples, see U. Wogihara, ed., *Abhisamayālaṃkāra’āloka Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā* (*Commentary on Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā*): *The Work of Haribhadra Together with the Text Commented*

with the first arising of the thought of becoming a Buddha (*prathamacittot-pāda*), or the initial arising of *bodhicitta*, typically eons before one first receives a Buddha's prediction, and apply the term *bodhisattva* from this point.⁴⁴ The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, the Mahāyāna sūtra for which we currently have the oldest datable evidence, divides the path into three stages, corresponding to bodhisattvas who are "first set out in the vehicle" (*prathamayānasamprasthita*), "irreversible" (*avinivartanīya*), and "bound by one birth" (*ekajātipratibaddha*), that is, destined to attain Buddhahood in their very next lives.⁴⁵ Though the text does not provide a timeframe for these stages, in one passage the Buddha predicts a woman's future attainment of Buddhahood and states that she had her first arising of the thought of becoming a Buddha in the presence of Dīpaṅkara at the same time that he himself received his prediction, presenting the interval between her entering the path and receiving her first prediction as being equivalent to that between his first prediction and attainment of Buddhahood.⁴⁶

On (Tokyo: Tokyo Bunko, 1932–35), 182, 747–48/translation available in Edward Conze, trans., *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines and Its Verse Summary* (Bollingen: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), 102, 220–21; Paul M. Harrison, ed., *The Tibetan Text of the Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra: Critically Edited from the Derge, Narthang, Peking and Lhasa Editions of the Tibetan Kanjur* (Tokyo: Reiyukai Library, 1978)/translation available in *The Samādhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present: An Annotated English Translation of the Tibetan Version of the Pratyutpanna-buddha-saṃmukhāvasthita-samādhi-sūtra* (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1990), §§15F, 17A–17B; dKon brtsegs, Kha, 12a/translation available in Jean Dantinne, trans., *La splendeur de l'inébranlable (Akṣobhyavyūha)*, Tome I, chapitres I–III, *Les auditeurs (śrāvaka)* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, Institut orientaliste, 1983), 102; *mDo sde*, Tsha, 264b–265b (*Ājātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā*); Jens Brarvig, trans. and ed., "Sarvadharmāpravṛttinirdeśa," in *Buddhist Manuscripts*, vol. 1, ed. Jens Brarvig (Oslo: Hermes, 2000), 122–25; Kotatsu Fujita, ed., *The Larger and Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtras* (Kyoto: Hozokan, 2011), 8, 79/translation available in Luis O. Gómez, trans., "The Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra: English Translation of the Sanskrit Text," in *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1996), §§15, 153; H. Kern and Bunyiu Nanjio, eds., *Saddharmapundarīka* (St. Petersburg: Imprimerie de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences, 1908–12), 22, 27, 317/translation available in H. Kern, trans., *The Saddharma-pundarīka, or The Lotus of the True Law* (1884; repr., Oxford: Clarendon, 1909), 22, 28, 300.

⁴⁴ On this, see, e.g., Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1932), 50; Lamotte, *Le traité*, 1:242 and passim; Paul Harrison, "The Earliest Chinese Translations of Mahāyāna Buddhist Sūtras: Some Notes on the Works of Lokakṣema," *Buddhist Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (1993): 171. The *Śūraṅgamasamādhi Sūtra* describes four types of prediction, including predictions made before and at the time of the arising of *bodhicitta*. *mDo sde*, Da, 289a–291a/translation available in Étienne Lamotte, trans., *La concentration de la marche héroïque (Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra)* (Brussels: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1965), §§100–108.

⁴⁵ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālamkāraśāloka*, 831. Tournier points out that these three stages are mentioned already in the two earliest Chinese translations of the text by Lokakṣema and Zhi Qian (*La formation*, 219–20). Following Haribhadra's commentary, Edward Conze lists four stages in his translation of the Sanskrit version of the sūtra, adding bodhisattvas "who progress on the course" (*caryāpratipanna*) as the second (*Perfection of Wisdom*, 254–55). Nattier mistakenly states that the sūtra is only aware of two stages (*Few Good Men*, 151).

⁴⁶ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālamkāraśāloka*, 747–48/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 219–21.

Although scholars have long envisioned early Mahāyānists as deciding to undertake the path to Buddhahood from the beginning, this does not seem to have been the case. When Mahāyāna sūtras present stories of Buddhas and bodhisattvas' first arising of the thought of attaining Buddhahood, they invariably depict it as taking place in the presence of a Buddha, suggesting that they shared with all known *nikāya* traditions the understanding that this is a necessary condition for entering the path.⁴⁷ In addition, though this key fact is generally obscured in scholarship, they apparently never encourage anyone to become a bodhisattva or present any ritual or other means of doing so. Like *nikāya* texts, they also depict the status of new or recent bodhisattvas as being largely meaningless. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, for instance, states that as many bodhisattvas as there are grains of sand in the Ganges turn back from the pursuit of Buddhahood and that out of innumerable beings who give rise to *bodhicitta* and progress toward Buddhahood, only one or two can become irreversible.⁴⁸ The larger *Sukhāvatīvyūha* similarly warns that vast numbers of bodhisattvas turn back from the pursuit of Buddhahood.⁴⁹ When the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and other early texts designate bodhisattvas as “beginners” (*ādikarmika*), or as “newly” or “not long set out in the [Mahā]yāna” (*navayānasamprasthita*, *acirayānasamprasthita*), they treat them with scorn. They prohibit such bodhisattvas from listening to Mahāyāna sūtras and describe them in strong, negative terms, for example, as blind (*andhīkṛta*), unintelligent (*alpabuddhika*), lazy (*kuṣīda*), weak (*alpasthāman*), and as having little merit (*alpapuṇya*) and few good roots (*alpakuśalamūla*).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ For a few examples, see Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* 'ālokā, 747–48/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 220–21; Harrison, *Tibetan Text of the Pratyutpanna Samādhi of Direct Encounter*, §150; dKon brtsegs, Kha, 3b/Dantinne, *Splendeur de l'inébranlable*, 79–80; Kern and Nanjio, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, 218–19/Kern, *Lotus of the True Law*, 208–9; Peter Skilling and Saerjii, “How the Buddhas of the Fortunate Aeon First Aspired to Awakening,” *Annual Report of the International Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* 17 (2014): 245–91, 19 (2016): 149–92, 20 (2017): 167–204, 21 (2018): 209–44 (cf. *mDo sde*, Ka, 288a–336b/translation available in *The Fortunate Aeon: How the Thousand Buddhas Become Enlightened*, trans. Dharma Publishing Staff [Berkeley, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1986], 4.1483–733). For some additional examples, see Wangchuk, *Resolve*, 96–97. I am not aware of any case in which a Mahāyāna sūtra clearly applies the term “bodhisattva” to anyone not understood to have given rise to the thought of attaining Buddhahood in the presence of a Buddha. If any do use the term in this way, they likely do so in only a loose sense. The *Dazhidu lun*, for example, states that “les Bodhisattva sans régression sont nommés les vrais Bodhisattva, car ils le sont vraiment; les autres, les Bodhisattva susceptibles de recul, sont nommés Bodhisattva [par extension]” (Lamotte, *Le traité*, 1:243). We see a similar usage of the term in Theravāda texts as well (see n. 24).

⁴⁸ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* 'ālokā, 215–16, 652/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 107, 197.

⁴⁹ Fujita, *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtras*, 74, my translation; cf. Gómez, “Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha,” §148.

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* 'ālokā, 335–36, 395, 524, 526, 578, 783/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 126, 139, 170, 182, 235; Nattier, *Few Good Men*, §15B; Braarvig, “Sarvadharmā-pravṛttinirdeśa,” §§2, 3, 11; Kern and Nanjio, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, 233, 312/Kern, *Lotus of the True Law*, 221–22, 295–96; dKon brtsegs, Cha, 22b (*Suṣhitamatidevaputrparipṛcchā*). Later sūtras often take a more positive attitude toward beginners, but by this time other ideas, especially the idea that listening to Mahāyāna sūtras makes one irreversible ipso facto (see below), made it unnecessary to have attained advanced bodhisattva status in a past life.

They identify them with those who reject Mahāyāna sūtras, or those who once accepted Mahāyāna teachings but later abandoned them.⁵¹ Two passages in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* state that such bodhisattvas can be expected to end up becoming *śrāvakas* or *pratyekabuddhas*.⁵² This is the same basic idea that we saw in our discussion of *nikāya* texts: Those who have recently begun to pursue Buddhahood have no significant chance of ever attaining it.

Rather than encouraging their listeners to undertake the bodhisattva path from the beginning, Mahāyāna authors presented methods for enabling them to determine that they had already received a prediction in a past life, or at least gotten close to this point. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* presents by far the richest variety of such methods, some of the most interesting of which are ritual or divinatory in nature. One passage states that if a bodhisattva is asked what is most crucial in the pursuit of Buddhahood, and answers that one should focus only on emptiness (*śūnyatā*), then that bodhisattva has not yet been predicted. If the bodhisattva answers that one should focus on skillful means (*upāyakaūśalya*) and demonstrates the thought of not abandoning all beings, the bodhisattva is irreversible. Other passages present certain dreams as evidence of irreversibility: “If a bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* reflects even while dreaming ‘all dharmas are like a dream,’ ” “if even while dreaming a bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* does not give rise to longing . . . for the level of *śrāvakas* or *pratyekabuddhas*, or toward the things of the triple world,” or if one dreams that one is a Buddha teaching the Dharma in a round pavilion in the midst of a vast assembly, for instance, one is irreversible.⁵³ The text also advocates using acts of truth to establish

⁵¹ See, e.g., Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra’ālokā*, 395, 524–26, 583–84/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 139, 170, 185; *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: Transliterated Sanskrit Text Collated with Tibetan and Chinese Translations*, ed. Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism, Taisho University (Tokyo: Taisho University Press, 2004)/translation available in Étienne Lamotte, trans., *L’enseignement de Vimalakīrti (Vimalakīrtinirdeśa)* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires, 1962), §§12.17–18. The first of these passages depicts beginner bodhisattvas rejecting the *Prajñāpāramitā* after having been misled by bad teachers. Others emphasize the importance of such bodhisattvas relying on *kalyāṇamitras* (Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra’ālokā*, 73–75, 335–36, 593/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 88, 126, 188). We may perhaps imagine that if such “beginners” were to wholeheartedly embrace the *Prajñāpāramitā* they would be reevaluated as advanced bodhisattvas. This is suggested, for example, by a passage in the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, which has a slightly less clear parallel in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, that says that the text should not be taught in front of bodhisattvas newly set out in the vehicle, but that if it is, and they do not reject it, then they are actually advanced bodhisattvas close to attaining a prediction. See Takayasu Kimura, ed., *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin, 1986–2009), 4.15–16/translation available in Edward Conze, trans., *The Large Sutra on Perfect Wisdom, with the Divisions of the Abhisamayālaṅkāra* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 320–21; Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra’ālokā*, 466–69/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 154–55.

⁵² Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra’ālokā*, 584, 772/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 185, 230.

⁵³ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra’ālokā*, 761–64, my translation; cf. Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 226–27. See also Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṅkāra’ālokā*, 469/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 155.

irreversibility. If a bodhisattva wakes from a dream when a village or town is on fire and resolves, “I have the attributes, marks, and signs . . . by which one is to be remembered as an irreversible bodhisattva. By this truth, by this statement of truth, let this burning town or this burning village be extinguished, let it become cold, let it go out,” and the fire goes out, the bodhisattva has received a prediction from previous Buddhas; if it does not, the bodhisattva has yet to be predicted. If someone is possessed by a non-human being and a bodhisattva is able to exorcise it with a similar act of truth, that bodhisattva has been predicted, otherwise not.⁵⁴

The way that such methods were used in circles associated with the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is not fully clear. The first of these passages seems to describe a test administered by others that might be used to establish irreversible status publicly, while most of the other methods would seem limited to private use. In one passage, the text states that Māra may intervene in such tests in order to convince bodhisattvas that they are irreversible when they are not, making the tests unreliable.⁵⁵ This may indicate that at some point the text’s authors wished to deemphasize or move away from ritual and divinatory methods. Such methods are generally not mentioned by other early sūtras, suggesting that they may represent a peripheral approach to the problem, or an early approach that quickly became outmoded.

In any case, the methods for determining that one is an advanced or irreversible bodhisattva that the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* advocates most frequently are based on one’s encounter with and reaction to the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* itself. The text presents such methods in more than twenty passages. Because of their richness, I quote a few examples at length.

[The Buddha’s disciple, Subhūti:] “If a bodhisattva-*mahāsattva*’s mind does not shrink back, cower, or despair . . . when this profound *Prajñāpāramitā* is being spoken, preached, or explained, [but] firmly believes in it with determination, the bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* is to be known as not lacking in *Prajñāpāramitā*, as standing on the irreversible bodhisattva level.”⁵⁶

[The Buddha’s disciple, Śāriputra: “In regard to the] son or daughter of good family who will obtain this profound *Prajñāpāramitā* for seeing, paying homage, honoring, and hearing, and how much more so for, after hearing it, having it recited [in order] to memorize, retain in memory, recite, learn, set forth, and preach [it] . . . it should be known, Bhagavan, ‘This person of the bodhisattva vehicle has come from afar, has set out for long in the [Mahā]yāna; this person of the bodhisattva vehicle is near to a

⁵⁴ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*’*ālokā*, 766–68, my translation; cf. Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 228–29. For other indications of irreversibility in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, see Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*’*ālokā*, 665–93/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 200–208.

⁵⁵ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*’*ālokā*, 771–72/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 230.

⁵⁶ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra*’*ālokā*, 45–46, my translation; cf. Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 85.

prediction. Bhagavan Buddhas will predict this bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* to complete awakening to unsurpassed, complete enlightenment.’ A bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* for whom this profound *Prajñāpāramitā* appears, even merely for the sake of hearing, should indeed be known as having long set out in the [Mahā]yāna, and as having a root of merit that has ripened.”⁵⁷

[Śāriputra:] “Bhagavan, it is just like a man leaving a [great] wild forest. While leaving, he would see foretokens, [such as] cowherds, animal herders, or boundaries . . . by which a village, town, or market town would be indicated. Having seen these foretokens, he thinks, ‘Since these foretokens are seen, my village, town, or market town is near.’ He becomes relaxed and no longer has concern for robbers. In just this way, Bhagavan, that bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* for whom this profound *Prajñāpāramitā* appears should understand, Bhagavan, ‘I am very near unsurpassed, complete enlightenment. I will obtain a prediction to unsurpassed, complete enlightenment before long.’ He should no longer fear, be frightened of, or afraid of, the level of *śrāvakas* or the level of *pratyekabuddhas*.”⁵⁸

[Śāriputra:] “Bhagavan, it is just like, when spring has arrived, various buds appear on various trees whose [previous year’s] leaves have fallen. When the buds have appeared, the people of Jambudvīpa are overjoyed, thinking, ‘Having seen those foretokens on the trees, flowers and fruits will soon appear. Why? Because these foretokens are seen on the trees.’ In just this way, Bhagavan, when a bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* obtains this profound *Prajñāpāramitā* for seeing, paying homage, honoring, and hearing, when this profound *Prajñāpāramitā* turns up for him, then that bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* should be known as having a meritorious deed that has ripened. Just because of that previous root of merit this profound *Prajñāpāramitā* has been proclaimed to him. At that time, gods who have seen previous Buddhas are delighted with joy and gladness, thinking, ‘Previous bodhisattva-*mahāsattvas* also had just these foretokens for their predictions to unsurpassed, complete enlightenment. Surely this bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* will obtain a prediction to unsurpassed, complete enlightenment before long.’”⁵⁹

[The Buddha, speaking to Subhūti:] “Subhūti, Māra, the wicked one, with the appearance of a *śramaṇa*, having approached a . . . bodhisattva-*mahāsattva*, will say, ‘Re-nounce that which you have previously heard. . . . This is not the word of the Buddha [*buddhavacana*], it is the work of poets, poetry . . .’ If, having heard this, a bodhisattva trembles and quivers, this should be known, Subhūti, ‘This bodhisattva is not predicted by the Tathāgatas; this bodhisattva is not fixed [*anīyata*] in regard to the [eventual attainment of] unsurpassed, complete enlightenment; this one is not established in the irreversible sphere.’ If, however, Subhūti, a bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* does not tremble, even

⁵⁷ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra’ālokā*, 469–70, my translation; cf. Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 155.

⁵⁸ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra’ālokā*, 471, my translation; cf. Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 156.

⁵⁹ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra’ālokā*, 473–74, my translation; cf. Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 156–57.

having heard this speech of Māra, the wicked one . . . he is not one who puts faith in others. . . . Subhūti, when a bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* has been established in the irreversible sphere, then he is not guided by others. Subhūti, a bodhisattva-*mahāsattva* endowed with these attributes as well, these marks, these signs, should be remembered as irreversible from unsurpassed, complete enlightenment.”⁶⁰

The basic idea in each of these passages is that encountering and reacting positively to the text proves that one has already become an advanced bodhisattva in past lives. The first passage, which occurs in the first chapter of the text, and is attested already in the fragmentary *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscript in the Split Collection, which currently represents our oldest datable evidence for the Mahāyāna of any sort,⁶¹ states that anyone who believes in the text and does not become afraid when hearing it is irreversible, suggesting that at an early point in the text’s composition its authors attributed irreversibility to all of their followers.⁶² Though they do not go quite as far, the next three passages state that anyone who hears the text without rejecting it has already made significant progress on the path in previous lives and is close to receiving a prediction in the future. Since the text represents the Buddha’s most profound teaching, only advanced bodhisattvas have the proper disposition, or possess sufficient merit, to be able to encounter and accept it. The text thus serves as a signpost on the path, indicating that those who encounter it will receive a prediction in their next few lives. The final passage attributes irreversibility to those who resist criticism of the sūtra, suggesting that higher degrees of commitment to the text were correlated with higher levels of bodhisattva status.

Other early Mahāyāna sūtras generally present only text-based methods of determining bodhisattva status. Such methods are advocated by most Mahāyāna

⁶⁰ Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra’ālokā*, 674–75, my translation; cf. Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 202.

⁶¹ Harry Falk and Seishi Karashima, eds., “A First-Century *Prajñāpāramitā* Manuscript from Gandhara: *Parivarta* 1 (Texts from the Split Collection 1),” *Annual Report of the International Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* 15 (2012): 42.

⁶² The idea of being afraid of a text is commonly used as a euphemism for rejecting it, which is indicated by the fact that passages often depict believing in a text as the opposite response. For a few examples, see, in addition to the passage under discussion, the last passage from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* quoted above, the passages quoted from the *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* manuscript and *Pratyutpanna* below, and, for example, Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkāra’ālokā*, 581/Conze, *Perfection of Wisdom*, 184. Gregory Schopen interprets such passages as referring to religious experiences or mystical mental states, which I have elsewhere argued is unwarranted; see Gregory Schopen, trans. and ed., “The Manuscript of the Vajracchedikā Found at Gilgit,” in *Studies in the Literature of the Great Vehicle: Three Mahāyāna Buddhist Texts*, ed. Luis O. Gómez and Jonathan A. Silk (Ann Arbor: Collegiate Institute for the Study of Buddhist Literature and Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Michigan, 1989), 133–35 nn. 2 and 5, 139 n. 20; David Drewes, “The Forest Hypothesis,” in *Setting Out on the Great Way: Essays on Early Mahāyāna Buddhism*, ed. Paul Harrison (Sheffield: Equinox, 2018), 73–93. See also Tilmann Vetter, “Once Again on the Origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism,” trans. and ed. Anne Macdonald, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasien* 45 (2001): 78–79.

sūtras that I am familiar with that are more than a few pages long, often in multiple passages. Here I provide a list of examples, still just a fraction of what could be cited, with the aim of giving a sense of how pervasive this material is in these texts. A passage in the recently discovered *Bajaur Mahāyāna Sūtra* manuscript, which dates to the first or second century CE, states:

After having heard these teachings, one whose mind is not discouraged, (but) plunges in and believes resolutely, he is to be expected /// and ///. This bodhisattva will not turn away from the Supreme Enlightenment, he will not return from the Supreme Enlightenment.⁶³

In the *Akṣobhyavyūha Sūtra*, the Buddha says to Śāriputra:

Whichever bodhisattva-*mahāsattvas* hear this Dharma-discourse . . . and, having heard it, memorize [it], retain [it] in memory, copy, learn, [and] illuminate it in detail for others . . . even if they do not make a resolution [**prañidhāna*] to be born in that Buddha-field, those bodhisattva-*mahāsattvas* are to be known as irreversible and known as predicted to unsurpassed, complete enlightenment.⁶⁴

In the *Pratyutpannabuddhasaṃmukhāvasthitasamādhi Sūtra*, the Buddha, speaking to the bodhisattva Bhadrāpāla, states:

Bhadrāpāla, any *bodhisattvas*, whether householders or renunciants, who on hearing a *samādhi* such as this are not afraid, are not frightened, and are not fearful, who do not laugh at, revile, abuse, or reject it, but on the contrary rejoice at it when they hear it, have faith in, believe, and aspire to it, and conceive a desire to teach, [memorize, learn, retain in memory, recite,] copy, expound, and cultivate this *samādhi* [i.e., the *Pratyutpanna Sūtra* itself]. . . . Bhadrāpāla, such sons or daughters of good family as those have not worshipped one Buddha, nor have they created wholesome potentialities under one, two or three Buddhas; Bhadrāpāla, such sons or daughters of good family as those have worshipped a hundred Buddhas. On hearing this *samādhi* from those Tathāgatas such sons or daughters of good family as those have rejoiced at it and been convinced of it. In the last age, the last time, in the final five hundred years also, when they hear this *samādhi* they will not reject it. . . . Those sons or daughters of good family will become [or be] unable to regress from supreme and perfect awakening.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ingo Strauch, “More Missing Pieces of Early Pure Land Buddhism: New Evidence for Akṣobhya and Abhirati in an Early Mahayana Sutra from Gandhāra,” *Eastern Buddhist*, n.s., 41, no. 1 (2010): 42.

⁶⁴ dKon brtsegs, Kha, 60a–60b, my translation. For other, similar passages in the text, see, e.g., 63a–63b, 69b.

⁶⁵ Harrison, *Tibetan Text of the PratyutpannaSamādhi of Direct Encounter*, §§7B–D, and see also, e.g., §§15O–P, 23U, 25D–F. I have slightly corrected Harrison’s translation, in brackets, in accordance with the findings in David Drewes, “Oral Texts in Indian Mahāyāna,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 58, no. 2 (2015): 117–41.

In the *Drumakinnararājaparipṛcchā Sūtra*, the Buddha says to Ānanda:

Ānanda, those who hear this Dharma-discourse and, having heard [it], firmly believe [in it], and, having firmly believed [in it], memorize [it], retain it in memory, recite, learn, and illuminate [it] in detail for others, wisely investigate it, and progress toward thusness will not forget *bodhicitta*. Striving to mature beings, armed with the armor of great compassion, armed with the armor of great friendliness, they will conquer Māra and his forces and should be known as good men [**satpuruṣa*] headed toward the seat of enlightenment [**bodhimaṇḍa*].⁶⁶

The *Śūraṅgamasamādhi Sūtra* presents the following exchange:

[The Buddha's audience:] "As we understand the meaning of what the Bhagavan has said, those beings who hear this *Śūraṅgamasamādhi* and immediately firmly believe in it are fixed [**niyata*] in regard to the [eventual attainment of the] attributes of a Buddha." The Buddha said, "Son[s] of good family, it is just like that. It is just as you say. Beings who have not planted roots of merit, having heard this teaching, are not able to have faith in it. . . . [If] a bodhisattva is able to firmly believe in this samādhi . . . he has heard this samādhi before from fully enlightened Buddhas of the past."

The same text states:

Those sons or daughters of good family belonging to the bodhisattva vehicle, who, having heard this teaching explaining the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi*, firmly believing, have faith in it and confidence in it, will undoubtedly be irreversible from unsurpassed complete enlightenment.⁶⁷

In the Sanskrit version of the larger *Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra*, the Buddha states:

Any beings who hear the name of that Tathāgata Amitābha, and, having heard [it], resolutely give rise to even merely a single arising of thought endowed with faith, they all abide in irreversibility from unsurpassed, complete enlightenment.

In the same text, the forty-sixth of the forty-seven resolutions (*praṇidhāna*) made by the Buddha Amitābha while he was the bodhisattva Dharmākara is:

⁶⁶ Paul Harrison, ed., *Druma-kinnara-rāja-paripṛcchā-sūtra: A Critical Edition of the Tibetan Text (Recension A) Based on Eight Editions of the Kanjur and the Dunhuang Manuscript Fragment* (Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1992), §15B, my translation; see also, e.g., §§2R, 3A, 4I.

⁶⁷ *mDo sde*, Da, 297a–297b, 257b, my translation; cf. Lamotte, *La concentration*, §§129–30, 11. See also, e.g., *mDo sde*, Da, 292b/Lamotte, *La concentration*, §113.

If . . . when I attain enlightenment, those bodhisattvas who hear my name in that Buddha-field [i.e., Sukhāvatī] or in Buddha-fields other than that will not become irreversible from unsurpassed, complete enlightenment immediately upon hearing the name, may I not fully awaken to unsurpassed, complete enlightenment until then.⁶⁸

In the smaller *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra*, after listing the names of several Buddhas living in other worlds, the Buddha says to Śāriputra:

Śāriputra, whichever sons or daughters of good family will hear the name of this Dharma-discourse and retain in memory the name of those Bhagavan Buddhas, all of them will be embraced by [those] Buddhas and will be [or become] irreversible in regard to unsurpassed, complete enlightenment.⁶⁹

Two passages in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* read:

[The god Śakra, speaking to the Buddha:] Without doubt, those beings who will memorize this Dharma-discourse, retain it in memory, recite it, and learn it will be receptacles of the Dharma, how much more those who are dedicated to the effort of practice? For them all the negative rebirths will be closed; for them all the paths to the positive rebirths will be opened. They will be seen by all Buddhas. By them all rival teachers will be struck down. By them all Māras will be defeated. By them the paths to enlightenment will be purified. They will be established on the seat of enlightenment. They will have the entrance into the state of a Tathāgata.

[The Buddha:] Maitreya, those bodhisattvas who are confident in and intent on various phrases and syllables are to be known as beginner [*ādikarmika*] bodhisattvas, but, Maitreya, these bodhisattvas who will set forth, hear, firmly believe in, and make known this profound sūtra . . . these bodhisattvas are to be known as having long practiced the holy life [*ciracaratabrahmacarya*].⁷⁰

In the *Akṣayamatīrdeśa Sūtra*, Māra says to the Buddha:

By this exposition of religion [**dharmaparyāya*], Lord, all my forces with their equipment are weakened. Why? The bodhisattva, Lord, who hears this exposition of religion, by that very act that bodhisattva is prophesied to attain incomparable perfect

⁶⁸ Fujita, *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtras*, 48, 25(46), my translation; cf. Gómez, “Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha,” §§90, 28(46). See also, e.g., Fujita, *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtras*, 25(47), 49, 56(18), 58, 74, 79/Gómez, “Longer Sukhāvatīvyūha,” §§28(47), 94, 96(18), 99, 149, 153.

⁶⁹ Fujita, *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtras*, 92–93, my translation; cf. Luis O. Gómez, trans., “The Shorter Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra: English Translation of the Sanskrit Text,” in *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1996), §27.

⁷⁰ *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* §§12.2, 12.17, my translation; cf. the same sections in Lamotte, *Enseignement de Vimalakīrti*.

awakening. And Lord, established in a buddha-field somewhere, he is to be called a Buddha himself.⁷¹

Each of these texts states that those who listen to and devote themselves to it are either already advanced or irreversible bodhisattvas or that they will become irreversible when they hear it. Similar passages can be found in many other sūtras as well.⁷²

Despite the frequency and breadth with which this material occurs in Mahāyāna sūtras, it has generally been ignored in scholarship. Although Étienne Lamotte discussed passages on irreversibility at length, he seems not to have understood their significance, holding that Mahāyānists undertook the bodhisattva

⁷¹ Jens Braarvig, trans. and ed., *Akṣayamatīrdeśasūtra: The Tradition of Imperishability in Buddhist Thought* (Oslo: Solum, 1993), 2.585/1.157, and see also 2.583/1.156.

⁷² For some more good examples of such passages, see *mDo sde*, Tsha, 260a–260b, 266a (*Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā*); *mDo sde*, Ka, 15a, 16b/*Fortunate Aeon*, 69, 77; Nalinaksha Dutt, ed., *Samādhirāja-sūtra*, vol. 2 of *Gilgit Manuscripts* (1941–54; repr., Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1984), 219, 491–92, 647, etc.; Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki and Hokei Idzumi, eds., *The Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, rev. ed. (1934–36; Tokyo: Society for the Publication of Sacred Books of the World, 1949), 75, 103–4, 117, etc.; Jens Braarvig, trans. and ed., “The Practice of the Bodhisattvas: Negative Dialectics and Provocative Arguments; Edition of the Tibetan Text of the *Bodhisattvacaryānirdeśa* with a Translation and Introduction,” *Acta Orientalia* 55 (1994): §16; Jiro Hirabayashi, William B. Ras-mussen, and Safarali Shomakhmadov, trans. and eds., “The *Ajitasenavyākaraṇa* from Central Asia and Gilgit,” in *Buddhist Manuscripts from Central Asia: The St. Petersburg Sanskrit Fragments (SfPSF)*, vol. 1, ed. Seishi Karashima and Margarita I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya (Tokyo: The Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2015), 129, and cf. 106–7; Max Walleser, trans. and ed., *Aparimitāyur-jñāna-nāma-mahāyāna-sūtram: Nach einer nepalesischen Sanskrit-Handschrift mit der tibetischen und chinesischen Version* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter’s Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1916), §13; Jonathan Alan Silk, “The Origins and Early History of the *Mahāratnakūṭa* Tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism with a Study of the *Ratnarāśisūtra* and Related Materials” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1994), 2.384 n. 2; Kern and Nanjio, *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, 93, 224–25, 233–34, 337–40/Kern, *Lotus of the True Law*, 91, 221–22, 213–14, 320–24, etc.; A. von Staël-Holstein, ed., *The Kācāyapaparivarta: A Mahāyānasūtra of the Ratnakūṭa Class; Edited in the Original Sanskrit in Tibetan and in Chinese* (n.p.: Commercial Press, 1926), §160 (cf. the same section in M. I. Vorobyova-Desyatovskaya, ed., *The Kācāyapaparivarta: Romanized Text and Facsimiles* [Tokyo: International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2002]); Prods Octor Skjærvø, trans. and ed., *This Most Excellent Shine of Gold, King of Kings Sūtras: The Khotanese Suvarṇabhāṣottamasūtra* (Cambridge, MA: Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University, 2004), §§6.3, 6.4, 7.39–7.44, etc.; Giotto Canevascini, trans. and ed., *The Khotanese Saṅghāṭasūtra: A Critical Edition* (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 1993), §§13–14, 16, 108, etc.; Isshi Yamada, ed., *Karuṇapūṇḍarīka* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1968), 2.28, 111, 140, 172, 262, etc.; Nalinaksha Dutt, ed., *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhāna-vyūhaṃ*, in *Gilgit Manuscripts*, vol. 1 (1939; repr., Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1984), 53–54, 60, 61–62, 66, etc.; P. L. Vaidya, ed., “Avalokiteśvarapūṇḍarīkavyūhaḥ,” in *Mahāyāna-sūtra-saṃgraha*, pt. 1 (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1961), 300, 306–7, etc.; Daniel Boucher, trans., *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna: A Study and Translation of the Rāṣṭrapālāparipṛcchā-sūtra* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), 165, 170; Michael Zimmermann, trans. and ed., *A Buddha Within: The Tathāgatarbhasūtra: The Earliest Exposition of the Buddha-Nature Teaching in India* (Tokyo: International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, 2002), §12A; *dKon brtsegs*, Cha, 256b, 262a (*Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanāda*).

path from the beginning, “par serment individuel sans aucune intervention cléricale.”⁷³ Daniel Boucher makes the nearly correct observation that “the lack of a living buddha in this world made the bodhisattva path impossible for members of the Mainstream tradition,” but seems to overlook passages of this sort, speculating that Mahāyānists sought to receive predictions by propitiating Buddhas in other Buddha-fields.⁷⁴ Maintaining the old vision of Mahāyānists undertaking the bodhisattva path from the beginning, which seems to have no textual basis, Paul Harrison argues that passages of this sort represent an example of *captatio benevolentiae*, an attempt to curry favor with one’s audience though exaggerated flattery, and that they were not intended to be taken literally.⁷⁵ Similarly maintaining this old vision, Nattier argues that Mahāyāna emerged from a small number of dedicated, primarily male, ascetics, who decided to undertake the “grueling” bodhisattva path from the beginning, and that passages claiming that the followers of Mahāyāna sūtras are already irreversible represent a later “act of democratization” intended to broaden the path’s appeal.⁷⁶ As we have seen, however, when Mahāyāna emerged it was not believed

⁷³ Lamotte, *Le traité*, 1:243–45, 4:1788–93, 1803–7, “Sur la formation,” 379, *La concentration*, 27–28, 208–10 n. 209.

⁷⁴ Boucher, *Bodhisattvas*, 23. Boucher does not cite any evidence that supports this suggestion, and I am not aware of any.

⁷⁵ Paul Harrison, comments as respondent to the panel “Approaches to Early Mahayana” (XVth Congress of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, Jinshan, New Taipei City, Taiwan, June 24, 2011), and personal communications.

⁷⁶ Jan Nattier, “Gender and Hierarchy in the *Lotus Sūtra*,” in *Readings of the “Lotus Sūtra,”* ed. Stephen F. Teiser and Jacqueline I. Stone (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 88, 99–100, and, e.g., *Few Good Men*, 144–47. Although the *Ugraparipṛcchā Sūtra*, which Nattier presents as the basis for her view, does not directly attribute irreversibility to its followers, even the earliest versions of the text mention it several times. One passage, for example, states that a householder bodhisattva should rely on the “irreversible Saṅgha” or “irreversible bodhisattva Saṅgha” rather than the *saṅgha* of *śrāvakas*. Another states that all of the householder bodhisattvas in the sūtra’s original audience were “assured of Supreme Perfect Enlightenment” (*Few Good Men*, 152 n. 33, §§1B, 4C). The text also uses the term “beginner” (**ādikarmika*) bodhisattva as a criticism or insult (§15B). Nattier attempts to argue that the text is the oldest or most primitive known Mahāyāna sūtra but, as Ulrich Pagel has suggested, is “not very successful” (“About Ugra and His Friends: A Recent Contribution on Early Mahāyāna Buddhism,” review of *A Few Good Men*, by Jan Nattier, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser., 16, no. 1 [2006]: 75). Nattier supports her early date primarily by claiming that the text provides no evidence that “bodhisattvas differed from their *śrāvaka* counterparts in doctrinal or philosophical beliefs” (*Few Good Men*, 85), but this is far from true. In Nattier’s own translation, even the earliest versions of the text make reference to a full range of developed, specifically Mahāyāna concepts, including skillful means (**upāyakauśalya*) (§§20E, 25B), dedication (**pariṇāmanā*) of merit to the attainment of Buddhahood (§§3A, 4E, 7A, 11F), a developed conception of the **dharmadhātu* (§28), and the concept of **anutpattika[dharma]kṣānti* (§25L). The text also repeatedly mentions emptiness (§§18A, 25D, 25I, 27F) and the six perfections (§§20E, 25B, 25L), which, though mentioned elsewhere, are emphasized primarily in Mahāyāna texts. The fact that the sūtra does not elaborate on any of these ideas, as do other texts, especially the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, suggests a relatively late date. Rather than a nascent, or proto-, Mahāyāna, the text seems more likely to represent primarily a somewhat later monastic assertion of primacy over lay bodhisattvas. On irreversibility passages, see also Gil Fronsdal,

to be possible to become a bodhisattva or meaningfully enter the path to Buddhahood in one's present life. In addition, we find passages promising irreversibility already in the oldest known texts. Rather than a later attempt to make the path seem easier, these passages seem more likely to represent the primary device that early Mahāyānists used to identify as bodhisattvas in the first place.

Attempting to put together an overall picture, the Dīpaṃkara story, the original basis for all known traditions on the bodhisattva path, depicted making a resolution and receiving a prediction in the presence of a living Buddha as the method of becoming a bodhisattva. At this point, the figure of the bodhisattva was understood not as one who merely aimed to become a Buddha, but one who was destined to actually do so, an understanding preserved in Sarvāstivāda *abhidharma* texts, Yaśomitra's *Sphuṭārthā*, and Theravāda tradition up to the present day. Authors soon projected the Buddha's story further into the past, envisioning the path to Buddhahood as beginning with more preliminary steps, such as making a resolution without receiving a prediction, or giving rise to one's first thought of attaining Buddhahood, with some traditions applying the term *bodhisattva* to beings at this point. Even with this extension, however, the initial step of entering the path to Buddhahood was apparently invariably understood to require the presence of a living Buddha, with confidence in one's status being possible only after receiving a Buddha's prediction. Although most or all of the *nikāya* models we have looked at are found in texts that were composed after the Mahāyāna emerged, this perspective had clearly become established prior to the composition of the oldest surviving Mahāyāna sūtras, because the authors of these texts presuppose and attempt to work around it.

Before the emergence of Mahāyāna sūtras, some Buddhists may have experimented with identifying as bodhisattvas by making resolutions before stūpas or bodhi trees, or by dedicating acts of merit to the attainment of Buddhahood, as Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda commentarial texts suggest. The fact that such methods are rejected by all of the texts that mention them, however, suggests that they failed to reach wide acceptance. Some, like U Nu and other later Theravādins, who accepted that such deeds would not make them bodhisattvas in the present, may have performed them in the hope that they would enable them to become bodhisattvas in the future. Others may have sought to use truth-acts like those described in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* to prove that they had received a prediction in the past, like the Thai monk Sīrsadharājacūlāmūṇī and members of the modern Burmese Ariyā-weizzā organization. Others, like

Dawn of the Bodhisattva Path: The Early Perfection of Wisdom (Berkeley, CA: Institute of Buddhist Studies and BDK America, 2014), a published version of the author's 1998 doctoral dissertation, supervised by Nattier, which presents views similar to hers but is noteworthy for its translation and discussion of irreversibility passages found in Lokakṣema's second-century translation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*.

Ajahn Mun, may simply have claimed to remember making a resolution or receiving a prediction in a past life. Although kings and other prominent figures may sometimes have been able to make convincing presentations, other Buddhists would generally have had no reason to accept such pretensions, and probably most often regarded them as dubious or preposterous, as the *Mahāvibhāṣā*, modern Theravāda authors, and the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* suggest. This basic situation, in which being a bodhisattva was acknowledged as a rare possibility that was more or less impossible to verify in practice, seems to have formed part of the common heritage of all forms of Indian Buddhism from the emergence of the Dīpaṅkara story onward.

The claim that Buddhists who believed in Mahāyāna sūtras were already advanced bodhisattvas, repeated throughout the early texts, going back to the earliest point for which we have evidence, represented a departure from this common heritage. It created a new sphere in which Buddhists who accepted these texts could identify as bodhisattvas, and accept one another's bodhisattva status, without needing to rely on speculation, divination, or uncertain future hopes. In the early stages, witnessed primarily by the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the question of one's specific level of attainment seems to have been a matter of active concern, the primary issue being whether one had already received a prediction or was close to receiving one in the future. Soon, sūtras began to identify all of their followers as irreversible. As part of this development, the preoccupation with the past faded and texts began to claim that those who listened to them would become irreversible ipso facto, as we see in some of the passages quoted above. This apparently fairly rapid progression can perhaps be explained by the fact that Mahāyāna sūtra authors accounted for the introduction of all of their new ideas, perspectives, and practices by claiming that they represented the Buddha's previously unknown teachings intended primarily for bodhisattvas. Since these new teachings would be irrelevant without audiences who could identify as bodhisattvas, authors were predisposed to make it as easy as possible for their listeners to do so in order to expand the reach of their texts.

Though they are beyond the scope of this study, Mahāyāna authors continued to develop new ways of attributing bodhisattva status as time went on. The idea of the *ekayāna*, or one vehicle—associated most famously with the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* but found in other sūtras as well and adopted by later Madhyamaka *śāstra* authors—can be seen as an attempt to simplify the identification of large audiences as bodhisattvas and even to push people not inclined to identify as bodhisattvas into doing so. The theory that beings belong to distinct *gotras*, or lineages, that inherently predispose them to the eventual attainment of either *arhatship*, *pratyekabuddhahood*, or Buddhahood, advocated primarily by sūtras and *śāstras* associated with Yogācāra, can be seen as an alternate version of this strategy that made it possible to attribute bodhisattva status to Mahāyānists without forcing it on others. These developments

led eventually to the emergence of ritual practices for formally undertaking the bodhisattva path in this life, the apparently oldest known example of which is found in the perhaps late third-century *Bodhisattvabhūmi*.⁷⁷

Overall, the idea that one can become a bodhisattva or enter the path to Buddhahood by simple choice is only found in certain forms of later Mahāyāna. When Mahāyāna arose, and up to the present day for all known *nikāya* traditions, entering the path to Buddhahood was understood to require the fulfillment of specific requirements in a Buddha's presence, and one's status was regarded as tenuous until one received a Buddha's prediction. The old idea that Mahāyāna emerged from Buddhists deciding to become bodhisattvas is thus too simple and represents a significant misunderstanding. Rather than the expression of an ethical choice or the adoption of an ambitious "vocational alternative," identifying as a bodhisattva primarily meant accepting Mahāyāna preachers' claim that one had already become a supernatural being, consecrated by Buddhas to the highest religious destiny, in a past life. Although some individual Buddhists may have attempted to claim bodhisattva status for themselves prior to the emergence of Mahāyāna sūtras, the difficulty of substantiating such claims likely precluded the formation of a coherent bodhisattva tradition. Indeed, no bodhisattva tradition is known ever to have emerged that was not linked to these texts. Rather than being the product of a preexisting bodhisattva tradition, it thus seems most likely that Mahāyāna sūtras were responsible for bringing a bodhisattva tradition into existence for the first time. Text-based methods of establishing bodhisattva status are iterated in such similar forms in these texts, making use of such similar phrasing, that they seem almost certainly to have had a single origin. Although the precise developments leading up to it remain unclear, at some point a preacher presented a sūtra claiming that those who were able to encounter it and accept its new teachings had already become bodhisattvas in past lives. Since sūtras are infallible, this transformed those who accepted the text's authenticity into an audience of long-established bodhisattvas, ready for the revelation of further texts intended for their use. Responding to this demand, authors used the conceit of presenting the Buddha's special sūtras for bodhisattvas to introduce further teachings, leading to the composition of a vast corpus of the new texts and the emergence of the broad tradition we know as Mahāyāna.

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⁷⁷ Wangchuk, *Resolve*, 169–94. See also 357–90, where the author presents new editions of the Sanskrit and Tibetan versions of the relevant section of the text. Since, as Wangchuk points out, this ritual presupposes that "only those who by nature possess the spiritual disposition [i.e., *gotra*] of a *bodhisattva* can become *bodhisattvas*" (180), becoming a bodhisattva was not seen as a matter of simple choice even at this point.