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THE ORIGIN OF THE TERM 'MAHĀYĀNA' (THE GREAT
VEHICLE) AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE ĀGAMAS*

JOSEPH WALSER

Though a considerable amount of work has been done on early Mahāyāna, one of the questions that has received relatively less attention in Western language sources is why Mahāyānists chose the word *mahāyāna*¹ to begin with. While there is a growing consensus that the term “Mahāyāna” did not refer to a single set of doctrines, practices or propositions, the fact remains that at a certain point in history a set of authors gravitated toward the term “Mahāyāna” (trailing a penumbra of affiliated terms such as *śreṣṭhayaṇa*, *bodhisattvayāna*, *tathāgatayāna*, *agrayāna*, *ekayāna*, etc.) as a kind of brand name for their project. Presumably there was a reason for the choice – or at least some reason why this moniker stuck and others did not. What did the term mean to those who first used it? We have become so accustomed to hearing about the “Great Vehicle,” that few have stopped to consider that there may be something odd about identifying a religion with what is essentially a carriage. In this paper I argue that early Mahāyānists may well have adopted the term from a non-technical usage found in passages from the *Jāṇussonisūtra* of the *Samyuktāgama* and the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* of the *Dīrghāgama*. In these contexts, we find the term enmeshed in a

* An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the IABS Conference in Atlanta, GA. in June of 2008. I would like to thank the numerous scholars who gave me extensive feedback on various drafts, especially Jim Egge, Richard Gombrich, Ronald Davidson, Daniel Boucher, Sing-chen Lydia Chiang, Jan Nattier and Birgit Kellner.

¹ In the following I will capitalize Mahāyāna when referring to the religious movement. I will use the lower case italic mahāyāna when I am simply referring to the word in a non-technical sense.

complex metaphorical nexus spanning Buddhist and non-Buddhist literature. This nexus blurs together the Upaniṣadic concept of the “path leading to the gods” with the Vedic metaphor of the sacrifice as chariot and then infuses the whole with some pan-Indic ideas of a great *vimāna* chariot as a post-mortem reward for meritorious behavior. While these three ideas – the *devayāna patha*, the *yajñā* as *ratha* and the *vimāna* – may appear to have no obvious connection, I will argue that there was a precedent within non-Mahāyāna Buddhist literature connecting these ideas and that all three are specifically referenced in early *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.

The term *mahāyāna* in Mahāyāna literature

The place to begin our discussion of the term *mahāyāna* should be with the Mahāyānasūtras themselves. While the term may not have been as important at the beginning of the movement as it would become later, and not all texts that we would consider Mahāyānist even use the term,² the fact remains that the term is there, scattered among our earliest translations of Mahāyāna texts, its meaning largely taken for granted. Indeed, somewhat surprisingly, there are no Mahāyāna texts that introduce the term as if its audience had never heard it before. In every case, our texts assume that the audience is already familiar with the term and its positive connotations. Since the term would take on great significance later on, it is worthwhile inquiring into its origins and early connotations to ask what early audiences heard in the word *mahāyāna*. For this we need to look at a relatively early Mahāyāna text that discusses the term itself at some length.

I would like to begin by looking at what has been argued³ to be the earliest extended discussion of the term *mahāyāna*, and if not

² The term is, for example, notably missing from every Indic manuscript of the *Vajracchedikāsūtra*.

³ See Edward Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, 2nd edition, (Tokyo: The Reiyukai 1978), 9; and “The Development of *Prajñāpāramitā* Thought.”

the earliest at least the earliest discussion in *Prajñāpāramitā* literature – namely the excursus on the subject found in the first chapter of the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines*. Though this may not be the earliest Mahāyāna text,⁴ it is nevertheless one of the earliest to provide us with an etymology (if not an etiology) of the term itself. If we look at the earliest Chinese translation of the first chapter, we find the Venerable Pūrṇa asking, “What is the reason for saying that bodhisattvas are *mahā-saṃnāha-saṃnaddha* (armed with the great armor) and are *mahāyāna-saṃprasthita* (set out for the Mahāyāna)?”⁵ After a discussion of what it means to don the great armor, Subhūti asks the following:

Subhūti said to the Buddha, “For what reason does one set out in the *Mahāyāna*? What is the *Mahāyāna*? Where should one abide in the *yāna*? From where should one depart in the *yāna*? Who will perfect this *yāna*?”

The Buddha said to Subhūti, “[To say] ‘*Mahāyāna*, *Mahāyāna*’ is not correct. It cannot be delimited.”

[428a] Subhūti asked the Buddha, “I wish to know where the *yāna* comes from. From the triple world... it goes forth. It spontaneously abides in omniscience, and nothing comes forth from it. Nothing will come forth in the future. Why, Deva of Devas?”

The Buddha said, “If there are two dharmas of that which actually arises and that which will arise in the future, then both cannot be apprehended. If dharmas are not apprehended then from what dharmas do they come forth?”

In *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer 1968), 124.

⁴ Indeed, Tilmann Vetter has argued that the *Aṣṭa* was not originally affiliated with the Mahāyāna at all. See esp. his “Once Again on the Origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 45 (2001) 59–90.

⁵ The translation here and in the following section is from Egil Fronsdal, *The Dawn of the Bodhisattva Path: Studies in a Religious Ideal of Ancient Indian Buddhists with a particular Emphasis on the Earliest Extant Perfection of Wisdom Sutra* (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University 1998), 44.

Subhūti said to the Buddha, “The *Mahāyāna* is unsurpassed and without equal among the heavenly beings and among the beings below heaven. This *yāna* is equal to the sky. As the sky covers countless people, so the *Mahāyāna* covers countless beings. This is why it is called the *Mahāyāna*. And one cannot see when the *Mahāyāna* comes, or when it goes, or see its dwelling place. Nor can its center or edges be seen. Nor can it be seen or heard in this [discourse]. It cannot be seen anywhere and it cannot be seen in the triple world. Deva of Devas, this is why it has the name *Mahāyāna*.”

The Buddha said, “Well done, Subhūti! That is why it is called the *Mahāyāna*.”⁶

Parallel to this passage we find the following two verses from the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*:

Great as a giver, as a thinker, as a power, He mounts upon a vessel (*yāna*) of the Supreme *Jinas*. Armed with the great armour he’ll subdue Mara the artful. These are the reasons why ‘Great Beings’ are so called...

What then again is said to be ‘the vehicle of awakening’ [*bodhiyāna*]? Having mounted it one guides to Nirvāṇa all beings. This vehicle [*yāna*] is a Great Chariot [*mahā-vimāna*] like space. Those who attain safety, delight and ease are the most excellent of beings.⁷

⁶ Ibid., 46–7. I have chosen to use T. 224 here, but the same points can be made with any of the extant versions of the *Aṣṭa*. The last paragraph quoted here became the standard formula for *Mahāyāna* in *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. It is quoted with some minor variations (and usually introduced with the phrase, “*mahāyānaṃ mahāyānaṃ itīdaṃ bhagavann ucyate*,” in all versions of the 8000 P.P., as well as all versions of the 25,000 P.P., the 18,000 P.P. and the 100,000 P.P.

⁷ Edward Conze, *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & its Verse Summary* (Dehli: Sri Satguru Publications 1994), 11; Sanskrit: E. Obermiller, *Prajñā Pāramitā-Ratna-Guṇa-Saṃcaya-Gāthā* (Sri Satguru Publications, reprint 1992), 13–14.

Yāna as path/*yāna* as vehicle

Since my interest in the bulk of this paper lies in the origins and significance of the trope of the spiritual vehicle in Indic thought, I need to digress briefly to address arguments stating that it never was a vehicle in the first place. From the context of the *Aṣṭa* and the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcāyagāthā*, it makes sense to translate *mahā-yāna* as the “Great (*mahā*) Vehicle (*yāna*).” However, Tilmann Vetter,⁸ has argued for interpreting the second member of the compound, *yāna* as a “path” or an “approach” rather than a vehicle – an alternative that can be found in every Sanskrit dictionary.⁹ In this case, *yāna* would be a synonym for *mārga* and *mahāyāna* would mean something like “the great path.” To support his claim that the *Aṣṭa* was not originally affiliated with the Mahāyāna, he points to the fact that Lokakṣema renders the term as 摩訶衍 *móhēyǎn* and continues to represent the word *yāna* by the phonemic 衍 *yǎn* rather than translating it. The one time Lokakṣema *does* appear to translate the term (at the beginning of T. 418) he translates it as 大道 “great way” instead of “great vehicle.”¹⁰ Vetter also points to the same rendering in other early Chinese translations such as the anonymous Han dynasty translator of the *Kāśyapaparivarta*.¹¹ All of this leads Vetter to the conclusion that Lokakṣema and other ear-

⁸ See Vetter, esp. pp. 62–70.

⁹ See, for example, Monier Williams who cites a few examples of this usage from the Upaniṣads. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, s.v.

¹⁰ For what its worth, the translation 大道 appears quite a number of times in the verse portion of T. 418, which was probably completed by Lokakṣema’s school in 208 CE. [See Paul Harrison, *The Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra Translated by Lokakṣema* (Berkeley: The Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1998), 8 and also Jan Nattier, *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations: Texts from the Eastern Han 東漢 and Three Kingdoms 三國 Periods* (Tokyo: Soka University, The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology 2008), 81–83].

¹¹ Vetter, 62–63.

ly Chinese translators understood *mahāyāna* to be a “great way” and not a “great vehicle.”

Vetter may be correct about Lokakṣema’s understanding of the term in T. 418, but it is not clear to me that we can generalize from this one instance. Transliterating the term in his translation of the *Aṣṭa* did not allow Lokakṣema to avoid interpreting it. In the underlined passage of the *Aṣṭa* translation above, Lokakṣema made a clear choice to interpret the *mahāyāna* as a vehicle. This is because the Sanskrit itself forces the vehicle imagery. The Sanskrit reads as follows:

anena bhagavan paryāyeṇa mahāyānam idaṃ bodhisattvānāṃ mahāsattvānāṃ | naivāsyāgamo dṛśyate, naivāsyā nirgamo dṛśyate, nāpy asya sthānaṃ samvidyate |¹²

In such a manner is the *mahāyāna* of the bodhisattvas, the *mahāsattvas*. Its coming isn’t seen, nor is its going seen, nor is its abiding perceived.

To understand the *yāna* here as a path is untenable, since vehicles come and go while paths do not. The vehicle nature of the *yāna* becomes even clearer in Lokakṣema’s Chinese:

爾故呼摩訶衍摩訶衍者亦不見來時亦不見去時亦不見住處...¹³

Here, the repetition of the character 時 adds a temporal dimension to the sentence, (“it is not seen *when* it comes, it is not seen *when* it departs...”) that would simply not make sense if he understood the *mahāyāna* to be a path. Thus, we can infer that at least in this translation, Lokakṣema understood *mahāyāna* as a vehicle and not as a path.

Vetter is, of course correct that there were translators in Lokakṣema’s school who rendered *mahāyāna* as 大道, but if so, they were followed not long after by Kang Senghui and Zhī Qiān in

¹² P.L. Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1960), 12, lines 18–19.

¹³ T. 224, p. 428a9–10. All references to the *Taiśhō Tripitaka* throughout this paper are from the CBETA version.

the first half of the third century who habitually render it with 大乘, “great chariot.” If anything, I prefer to interpret Lokakṣema’s consistent transliteration as Eric Fronsdal does, as simply an indication that Lokakṣema understood his audience to be already familiar not only with the foreign term *mahāyāna* as a compound¹⁴ but also with the foreign term *yāna* as a well established technical term.

In the end, it is difficult to know what to make out of the Chinese translators’ choices. On the one hand, it should be remembered that the term Great *Dao* (大道) was certainly a religiously weighted term in Chinese culture at the time these translators were working and may have been chosen for reasons other than technical precision. Finally, some translators are inconsistent in how they translate *yāna*. Kumārajīva’s *Lotus sūtra* translation, for example, may render Buddha-*yāna* as 佛道¹⁵ while still rendering *mahāyāna* itself either as 大車¹⁶ (Great Cart) or as 大乘 (Great Chariot). Indeed, he makes a clear distinction between *yāna* and path in his translation of the *Dazhīdulun* (T. 1509) when he translates an unnamed source as saying, “The Buddha’s omniscience serves as a great vehicle (travelling) the Noble Eightfold Path that leads into nirvāṇa.”¹⁷

¹⁴ See Fronsdal, 48.

¹⁵ Seishi Karashima, *The textual study of the Chinese versions of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra in the light of the Sanskrit and Tibetan versions* (Tokyo: Sankibo Press 1992), 31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁷ T. 1509, p.72a14: 佛一切智為大車 八正道行人涅槃. Another theory has been proposed by Karashima Seishi, who argues that we frequently find the word *jñāna* in Central Asian manuscripts of the *Lotus sūtra* in places where much later Nepalese Sanskrit manuscripts have the word *yāna*. He argues that the word *mahāyāna* may be an incorrect back-formation resulting from an attempt to Sanskritize a Prakrit form of “*mahā-jñāna*” (Great Knowledge). [See Karashima, Seishi, “*Hokekyō ni okeru jō (yāna) to chie (jñāna) – daijō bukyō ni okeru yāna no gainen no kigen ni tsuite.*” In: Taga Ryūgen (ed.), *Hokekyō no juyō to tenkai* (Kyoto: 1993): 137–97.] Karashima’s argument delves into considerable detail regarding the manuscripts of the

Nevertheless, if we look at non-technical uses of the word *yāna* in Pali and in the Sanskrit Epics, the meaning of “vehicle” is by far the most common. Thus, while the term *yāna* may admit some ambiguity such that it may have even been possible for some native speakers to be confused as to its intended connotation depending on context, there are specific contexts in Mahāyāna literature that force us to understand the *yāna* as a vehicle not as a path. The *mahāyāna* of the bodhisattva in the *Aṣṭa* is that which will depart (*niryāsyati*) from the triple world – *niryāsyati* here functioning as an etymological play on words with *yāna*.¹⁸ Though it is of an uncertain date, this vehicular nature of the Mahāyāna is even further

Lotus sūtra and this is not the place for a full critique of his argument. As much as his hypothesis may apply to the *Lotus sūtra*, however, I have three main concerns as to whether his hypothesis applies to Mahāyānasūtras more broadly:

- 1) Since, presumably, the earliest Mahāyānists aspired to become Buddhas, we would expect to find the Buddha lauded as one with Great Knowledge in some authoritative non-Mahāyāna text. Mahāyānists could then tap into the legitimacy of the already established text through the adoption of the term. I have not been able to find the term *mahājñāna* applied to the Buddha in early biographies, though it does appear in later sources.
- 2) Barring (1), we should at least expect to find the Buddha’s enlightenment experience to be described as a special kind of *jñāna*, preferably a *mahājñāna*, in some other authoritative non-Mahāyāna text (preferably in an *abhidharma* treatise if not in one of the biographies of the Buddha). Again, this appears to be the case only in much later texts.
- 3) Finally, in the absence of (1) and (2), at the very least we should expect to find some Mahāyāna text to make a big deal about *jñāna*, preferably about *mahājñāna*. If the term had been so foundational to the early Mahāyāna movement, we should expect to find residual evidence of this fact in existing Mahāyāna texts. Though the term *mahājñāna* does appear in some early Mahāyāna texts its significance is certainly eclipsed by other terms like *prajñāpāramitā*.

¹⁸ Vaidya, *Aṣṭa*. 12, line 5ff.

amplified in the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcaya Gāthā*, which associates the *yāna* with the term *vimāna*.¹⁹

Mahāyāna as vehicle

What kind of vehicle is it? Like many Mahāyāna texts, the *Aṣṭa* describes the *bodhisattva mahāsattva* as one who is armed in the great armor and set out on the great vehicle. The juxtaposition of these two ideas, whether intentional or not, gives the overall impression of going into battle. The martial imagery also becomes amplified in the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*, which states that the one so mounted and armed will subdue Māra, and that the *Mahā-yāna* is a *mahā-vimāna*. It adds that this war chariot belongs to the “Supreme *jinas*,” meaning of course the Buddhas, but amid the extended war metaphor, we might be forgiven for translating Jina as “conqueror” here. In this regard, it is perhaps not insignificant that, outside of the Buddhist context, the word *mahāsattva* is often used to refer to the heroes in the *Mahābhārata*, who do battle mounted on *yānas* of their own. On the other hand, when the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* presents the Great Vehicle as a “great *vimāna*,” it is alluding to the celestial mansions that took the shape of vehicles driven by gods

¹⁹ The term *vimāna* can, of course, mean quite a few things. It can be an estate or a palace, but the more common meaning is as a kind of flying vehicle (such as Rāvaṇa’s *puṣpavimāna*). But to say, as the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* does, that the *mahāyāna* is a *mahāvimāna* constrains the semantic possibilities of both words to mean “vehicle.”

and *siddhas* in Buddhist,²⁰ Jain²¹ and Brahmanical²² literature. This would explain its size and why in both texts the *yāna* is a great one that is vast like space.

What are the origins of vehicles as a spiritual metaphor in the South Asian context? Such a metaphoric use of the word *yāna* is rare in the Vedas,²³ and non-existent in the Upaniṣads and the Epics. Similarly, there are no such references in Abhidharma texts prior to the *Mahāvibhāṣā* (which for its part seems to take the idea of “the three vehicles” for granted).²⁴ Where did the ‘vehicle’ rheto-

²⁰ The Pali canon devotes an entire work to *vimānas*, namely the *Vimānavatthu* [see Peter Masefield, *Vimāna Stories* (London: Wisdom Publications 1989)]. Though a similar collection does not appear to have been employed by other sects, there are enough references to *vimānas* in *avadāna* literature to suggest that the idea of *vimānas* was probably fairly widespread at the beginning of the Common Era.

²¹ Umāsvāti’s *Tattvārthasūtra*, 4.16 (SS 4.17) mentions that the fourth class of gods (the *vaimānika* gods) ride *vimānas*, though they are not the only ones to do so. Umāsvāti, *Tattvārtha Sūtra: That Which Is*, Nathmal Tatia, trans. (San Francisco: Harper Collins 1994), 104.

²² See MBh 13.110 (= section 107 in Ganguli’s translation).

²³ I have only been able to locate two instances in the Vedas where the *yāna* in *devayāna* could be read as “vehicle.” At *Ṛgveda* 10.51.2, Agni’s fire sticks are said to be *devayānī* in which Mitra and Varuṇa reside. Again, at *Ṛgveda* 10.181.3 the Yajus is said to be the first *devayāna* to have fallen. In both cases, reading *yāna* as “path” is also possible, but reading it in the sense of “leading to” is a bit more awkward. There may be other examples, but in the vast majority of cases (and always in the Spaniards) *devayāna* modifies some other word, usually *patha*, *pantha* or *adhvan*.

²⁴ See, e.g., T. 1547, p. 445c11ff. and T. 1545, 735b–c. The latter is translated by Fa Qing in her dissertation: *The Development of Prajñā in Buddhism from Early Buddhism to the Prajñāpāramitā System: With Special Reference to the Sarvāstivāda Tradition* (Ph.D. diss., University of Calgary, 2001), 87–88. Coincidentally, the idea that *arhants*, *pratyekabuddhas* and *buddhas* constitute three separate spiritual attainments shows up in the archaeological record in a Gandhāran inscription dating from 55 CE; see Sten Konow, “A new Charsadda inscription.” In: *D. R. Bhandarkar Volume*, ed. Bimala Churn

ric that culminates in the term *mahāyāna* come from and what was its significance for those who adopted it?

The most likely hypothesis, and the one that I wish to expand on here, was first suggested by Surendranath Dasgupta²⁵ in 1932 and expanded upon by Richard Gombrich²⁶ sixty years later. The hypothesis is that the term *mahāyāna* is somehow derived from the *devayāna patha* and *pitṛyāna patha* of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-* and *Chandogyopaniṣad*. The idea of the two paths is in fact much older – appearing already in the *Atharvaveda*²⁷ – but the point is still a valid one. The gist of Gombrich's argument is that there is one text in the Pali Canon, the *Jāṇussoṇisutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, that “puns” on the Upaniṣadic idea of ‘yāna’ (which he argues should otherwise be taken as “way” rather than “vehicle”) to read it as a chariot, and that passages such as the above passage from the *Aṣṭa* merely extend the punning that was already in the canon. Let me state from the outset that I think that both Gombrich and Dasgupta are correct, but that they are correct in ways that perhaps neither anticipated.

I would like to begin with the Upaniṣadic passages to which Dasgupta and Gombrich refer because the Buddhist appropriation

Law (Calcutta: Indian Research Institute 1940), 305–10. This is certainly close to the time period of the *Mahāvibhāṣā*. Note however, that the inscription itself does not refer to the three attainments as “vehicles.”

²⁵ Surendranath Dasgupta, *History of Indian Philosophy*, vol. I (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass 1975), 125, note 2: “The word *Yāna* is generally translated as vehicle, but a consideration of numerous contexts in which the word occurs seems to suggest that it means career or course or way, rather than vehicle.... The word *Yāna* is as old as the *Upaniṣads* where we read of *Devayāna* and *Pitṛyāna*. There is no reason why this word should be taken in a different sense.”

²⁶ Richard Gombrich, “A momentous effect of translation: The ‘vehicles’ of Buddhism.” In *Apodosis: essays presented to Dr W. W. Cruickshank to mark his eightieth birthday* (London: St. Paul's School 1992): 34–46.

²⁷ See *Atharvaveda* 6.117.3 and 12.2.10.

of the concept of the *devayāna patha* is not always as direct as it might seem. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* we find the statement: “For we have heard even the saying of the seer: I have heard of two paths for men, the one that leads to fathers and the one that leads to the gods. By these two all that lives moves on, whatever there is between father (heaven) and mother (earth).”²⁸ Gombrich states that this may be one of the earliest articulations in India of a post-mortem soteriology.²⁹ Whether it is the earliest or not, it is certainly an articulation that held great authority in subsequent Indian thought. Authority, however, does not mean consensus. It appears that there were differing interpretations of these paths among Upaniṣadic authors. The *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇopaniṣad* for instance depicts the *devayāna patha* as leading up through successively higher tiers of gods until the ultimate world of Brahmā (*brahmaloka*) is achieved in which one may converse with a thoroughly anthropomorphic Brahmā.³⁰ On the other hand, the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* depicts the *devayāna* as the path leading ultimately to the *brahmaloka* where its traveler, “...becomes (transparent) like water, one, the seer without duality. This is the world of Brahmā.”³¹

Radhakrishnan translates *yāna* in this passage in the sense of “leading to” instead of as the object of the verb itself. Indeed, in the Vedic context starting from the *Ṛgveda* onward *devayāna* is usually used as a *bahuvrīhi* compound modifying something else, usually *patha*, *pantha* or *adhvan*. In these contexts, *yāna* is read in the sense of “leading to the gods.” Reading it as a genitive *tatpuruṣa* in the sense of path of the gods is also possible (something like “the path that is the way to the gods”) but a “path that is a vehicle

²⁸ *Bṛh.* 6.2.2; S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upaniṣads* (Delhi: Indus Publications 1994), 310. See also *Chāndogya* 5.3.2 and (later) *Muṇḍ* 3.1.6.

²⁹ Gombrich, 36.

³⁰ *Kauṣ.* I.5–7. Radhakrishnan, 758–60.

³¹ Radhakrishnan, 266: “*Salila eko draṣṭa-ādvaito bhavati, eṣa brahmalokaḥ.*”

of the gods” is awkward (how can a path be a vehicle?), and I can find no early text that continues the discussion as if the *devayāna* is a vehicle.

It is well known that Buddhists so thoroughly appropriated the idea of the *brahmaloka*, that few Buddhist texts make mention of it in its non-Buddhist context. Unlike the *brahmaloka*, appropriation of the *devayāna* by which one arrives at the *brahmaloka* is much less pronounced and always retains something of its non-Buddhist flavor. Nevertheless, the few examples in which the term appears in the Pali Canon seem to represent a progressive *distancing* of Buddhist interests away from this Vedic norm. Still, the lingering authority of this idea even for Buddhists is attested by the fact that no early Buddhist text simply rejects the idea outright.

Perhaps the earliest Buddhist reference to the *devayāna* is found in the *Sutta Nipāta*. In a discourse in which the Buddha argues with a Brahmin that caste is no obstacle to spiritual progress, the Buddha reminds the Brahmin of the untouchable named Mātāṅga who was revered by Brahmins and Kṣatriyas alike. According to the *sutta*, Mātāṅga:

... set out on the unpolluted great way which leads to the devas, (and) having discarded passion and sensual pleasures he reached the world of Brahmā. Birth did not keep him from being born in the world of Brahmā.³²

This *sutta* references an explicitly Vedic idea (the *devayāna mahā-patha*) to argue that the one who follows Buddhist morality is the *real* Brahmin. It denigrates neither the Vedic Hindu goal of the *devayāna patha* nor the *brahmaloka* but simply says that it is the Buddhist practitioner who *really* achieves that goal.

³² K.R. Norman, 16; SN verse 139 (= PTS p. 24): *devayānaṃ abhiruyha, virajaṃ so mahāpathaṃ; kāmarāgaṃ virājetvā, brahmalokūpago ahu; na naṃ jāti nivāresi, brahmalokūpapattiyā*. Throughout the article, I have used the CSCD CD-ROM version of the Pali Canon, except where noted.

When the term appears again in the *Kevaddhasutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* the stance is more critical. There, the Buddha tells of a monk who “attained to such a state of mental concentration that the way to the deva-realms (*devayāniyo maggo*) appeared before him.”³³ He then proceeds to pose a question to the gods of successively higher heavens, but receives no answer. Then in a separate concentration, the path leading to Brahmā (*brahmayāniyo maggo*) appears to him. That this text divides the path into two suggests a shared worldview with early *abhidharma* which relegates all heavens below that of Brahmā’s retinue to the *devaloka*, which is accessible via the “8 skillful states of mind motivated by non-attachment, friendliness and wisdom (*kusala-citta*).”³⁴ By contrast, the heavens from Brahmā’s retinue upward are only accessible via the *dhyānas*. The two concentrations employed by the monk are surely to be understood as proper Buddhist fare, and yet the fact that none of the gods encountered along either path can answer the monk’s question displays a kind of parodic critique of the system’s Vedic parentage.

In neither of these references to the *devayāna* can the *yāna* be reasonably read as “vehicle.” This way of reading the compound only occurs late in the Pali Canon. The only canonical reference to the *devayāna* that can be interpreted as a “vehicle of the gods” can be found in a passage from the *Apadāna*. There an untouchable gives a couch (*mañca*) to the Buddha Anomadassī. As a result of that gift, the Buddha predicts that whether he be reborn among the gods or among men, he will attain (*paṭilabhissati*) a *yāna* in his future birth that will be the “counterpart (*paṭibhāga*)

³³ Walshe, *The Long Discourses*, 177. DN I 215: *Atha kho so, kevaṭṭa, bhikkhu tathārūpaṃ samādhiṃ samāpajji, yathāsamāhite citte devayāniyo maggo pāturahosi*. The passage is virtually identical to that of the *Dīrghāgama* at T. 1, p. 102a26ff.

³⁴ See Rupert Gethin, “Cosmology and Meditation: From the *Aggāñña-Sutta* to the *Mahāyāna*,” *History of Religions* 36.3 (1997, 183–213): 194.

of the *devayāna*.”³⁵ This passage seems to be blurring the idea of the *devayāna* as that which leads to a post mortem reward with the pan-Indian idea of a magnificent *vimāna*, or “estate,” as the fruit of meritorious activity.

We find a similar idea in the *Milindapañha*, albeit in one of the sections generally considered to be late. Here again context requires us to read *devayāna* as “vehicle of the gods” and, as in the *Apadāna*, the vehicle is explicitly said to be result of meritorious giving.

Suppose, O king, there were some virtuous Samana or Brahman, of high character, and he were paralysed, or a cripple, or suffering from some disease or other, and some man desirous of merit were to have him put into a carriage, and taken to the place he wished to go to. Would happiness accrue to that man by reason thereof, would that be an act leading to rebirth in states of bliss?

Yes, Sir. What can be said (to the contrary)? That man would thereby acquire a trained elephant, or a riding horse, or a bullock-carriage, on land a land-vehicle and on water a water-vehicle, in heaven a vehicle of the gods (*devesu devayānaṃ*) and on earth one that men could use, – from birth to birth there would accrue to him that which in each would be appropriate and fit, – and joys appropriate would come to him, and he would pass from state to state of bliss, and by the efficacy of that act mounting on the vehicle of *iddhi* he would arrive at the longed-for goal, the city of Nirvāṇa itself.³⁶

It is only in this passage that there appears to be no reference to Brahmanical practice, though even here it is the “*iddhiyāna*” that takes him to nirvāṇa and not the *devayāna*. Regardless, we have in this text and in the *Apadāna*, the idea of a spiritual vehicle (a *devayāna* or an *iddhiyāna*) as a postmortem reward for meritorious behavior – just like a *vimāna*. That *yāna* as practice might

³⁵ *Apadāna*, vol. 2. p. 147: *devaloke manusse vā, nibbattissati puññavā; devayāna-paṭibhāgaṃ, yānaṃ paṭilabhissati.*

³⁶ *The Questions of King Milinda*, T.W. Rhys-Davids, trans, (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1890), 336–7.

blend with the idea of *yāna* as *vimāna* is not as far fetched as it might seem. Though not all *vimānas* are vehicles, some certainly are. More important for our purposes, size figures into some of these reward *vimānas* – some of which are explicitly said to be either *mahā-rathas* or *mahad-yānas*. One such *vimāna* in the *Vimānavatthu* is said to be a *mahārātha* measuring forty leagues on each side and one in the *Mahābhārata* is referred to once as a “*mahad yāna*.”³⁷

Further, as Jim Egge points out, most Buddhist texts discuss the *vimāna* as a reward for meritorious giving, although this is not always the case. The fact that some in the *Vimānavatthu* receive their *vimāna* in the *brahmaloka* suggests that one could merit a *vimāna* from the practice of meditation as well, since rebirth in the *brahmaloka* can only occur through meditation.³⁸ For its part, the *Mahābhārata* passage referred to above offers different levels of austerities as an explicit *alternative* to expensive sacrifices. Each successive level of austerity results in a grander *vimāna* – thus not necessarily being the results of meritorious giving. Certainly the activities that lead to the awarding of a *vimāna* – *dāna* and *prajñā* –

³⁷ MBh: 13, 110, 44; *Vimānavatthu*, 92. Most scholars consider MBh chapters 12 & 13 to be later additions to the *Mahābhārata*. While I have no intention of getting into that debate, the passage in question does not display any obvious influence from Mahāyāna texts and so should be considered at least to be an independent, even if later, tradition.

The connection of the idea of a *mahāyāna* with the *vimāna* tradition may help to explain a curious fact pointed out by Vetter (p. 66): “I have further not found the idea of joint travelling in a great vehicle in connection with the word *mahāyāna* even in the basic texts of the Pure Land tradition, where it might be expected.” It is noteworthy in this regard that the size of the *vimānas* in this literature is simply to reward past behavior. There is no further discussion of those so rewarded transporting anybody.

³⁸ See James Egge, *Religious Giving and the Invention of Karma in Theravāda Buddhism* (Richmond, U.K.: Curzon Press, 2002), 86–7. For the argument that the *brahmaloka* is attainable only through meditation, see *Visuddhimagga*, 415.

are consonant with those stressed in Mahāyānasūtras teaching the bodhisattva path.³⁹ The idea that one's spiritual accomplishments will result in the magnificence and/or the size of one's spiritual vehicle may well be behind the *Ratnaguṇasamcayaḡāthā*'s reference to the Mahāyāna as a *mahāvīmāna*. Further, this would explain the appearance of the word in early inscriptions and manuscripts. When the word *mahāyāna* does begin to appear in the archeological record (I am thinking particularly of one of the Niya documents,⁴⁰ the Inscription of Aṃḡoka,⁴¹ the Copper Scroll of the son of Opan-da in the Schøyen Collection,⁴² and the Huviṣka fragment⁴³), the phrase "one who has mounted the *mahāyāna*" appears to be a term of prestige.⁴⁴ Finally, the only other parallel use of the word

³⁹ As Jan Nattier has argued: "...even in texts like the *Ugra* that do contain the standard list [of six perfections] it is rare that equal attention is devoted to each. Indeed, most bodhisattvasūtras seem to fall into one of two basic categories: those (like the *Ugra*) that emphasize *dāna*, and those (like the *sūtras* belonging to the "perfection of wisdom" category) that emphasize *prajñā*." Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, 153.

⁴⁰ Thomas Burrow, *A Translation of the Kharosthi Documents from Chinese Turkestan*. London: The Royal Asiatic Society 1940: 79–80.

⁴¹ Richard Salomon, "A Stone Inscription in Central Asian Gāndhāra from Endere (Xinjiang)," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*, n.s. 13 (1999), 1–13.

⁴² Gundrun Melzer and Lore Sander, "A Copper Scroll Inscription from the Time of the Alchon Huns." In *Buddhist Manuscripts* vol. 3, Jens Braarvig, ed. (Oslo: Hermes Publications 2002), 251–278.

⁴³ Richard Salomon. "A Fragment of a Collection of Buddhist Legends, with a Reference to King Huviṣka as a Follower of the Mahāyāna." In *Buddhist Manuscripts* vol. 2, Jens Braarvig, ed. (Oslo: Hermes Publications 2002), 255–267.

⁴⁴ For the most part, even its latter day detractors refrain from attacking it using the name Mahāyāna, preferring to refer to the movement by the more pejorative designations of "*Śūnyavādin*" (advocates of emptiness), "*Nāstivādin*" (advocates of non-existence), or "*Khapuṣpavādin*" (advocates of 'sky-flowers'). A notable exception being a report of an anonymous edi-

yāna is in the context of the “three vehicles” of the *śrāvakayāna* [meaning the attainment of the *arhat*], *pratyekabuddhayāna*, and *buddhayāna*. At least one discussion contrasting the three vehicles in the *Mahāvibhāṣā* makes it clear that the three *yānas* refer to the end results of practice, not to the paths leading to those results.⁴⁵ Given the echoes of *vimānas*, we might understand mounting the *mahāyāna* to be less about getting somewhere than as a mark of prestige and power awarded for prior spiritual accomplishment.

Great vehicles in the Sūtra Piṭaka

The Jāṇussoṇisutta: yāna as sacrifice

Indeed, the image of vehicle as a mark of prestige is also very much apparent in the *Jāṇussoṇisutta* – the *sūtra* which inspired Gombrich’s study. But even here, I would argue that the Vedic associations seem to linger as well. The Vedic connotations of the *devayāna* are, in this case, amplified by what appears to be a reference to the Vedic idea of the chariot as a metaphor for the sacrifice. The following is from the translation of Bhikkhu Bodhi:

At Sāvattḥī. Then, in the morning, the Venerable Ānanda dressed and, taking bowl and robe, entered Sāvattḥī for alms. The Venerable Ānanda saw the Brahmin Jāṇussoṇi departing from Sāvattḥī in an all-white chariot drawn by mares. The horses yoked to it were white, the reins, goad, and canopy were white, his turban, clothes, and sandals were white, and he was being fanned by a white chowry. People having seen this, said: “Divine indeed sir is the vehicle! It appears to be a divine vehicle indeed, sir!”

tor of the *Rāṣṭrapālapariṭchāsūtra*, who records the condemnation of Mahāyāna by his teachers. See Daniel Boucher, *Bodhisattvas of the Forest and the Formation of the Mahāyāna: A Study and Translation of the Rāṣṭrapālapariṭchā-sūtra*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press 2008), 137 and discussion on p. 109–10.

⁴⁵ See note 24 above.

Ānanda reports all of this to the Buddha and asks if there is anything in Buddhism that would be like this brahmanical vehicle. He asks:

“...Is it possible, venerable sir, to point out a divine vehicle in this Dhamma and Discipline?” ...the Blessed One said. “This is a designation for this Noble Eightfold Path: ‘the divine vehicle’ and ‘the vehicle of Dhamma’ and ‘the unsurpassed victory in battle.’”

“Right view, Ānanda, when developed and cultivated, has as its final goal the removal of lust, the removal of hatred, the removal of delusion. Right intention... Right concentration, when developed and cultivated, has as its final goal the removal of lust, the removal of hatred, the removal of delusion.”

“In this way, Ānanda, it may be understood how this is a designation for the Noble Eightfold Path: ‘the divine vehicle’ and ‘the vehicle of Dhamma’ and ‘the unsurpassed victory in battle’...”

[verses:]

Its qualities of faith and wisdom
 Are always yoked evenly together.
 Shame is its pole, mind its yoke-tie,
 Mindfulness the watchful charioteer.
 The chariot’s ornament is virtue,
 Its axle *jhāna*, energy its wheels;
 Equanimity keeps the burden balanced,
 Desirelessness serves as upholstery.
 Good will, harmlessness, and seclusion:
 These are the chariot’s weaponry,
 Forbearance its armour and shield,
 As it rolls towards security from bondage.
 This divine vehicle unsurpassed
 Originates from within oneself.
 The wise depart from the world in it,
 inevitably winning victory.⁴⁶

Jāṇussoṇi’s vehicle is initially described as a *vaḷavābhiratha*, not a *yāna*. It is the crowd of onlookers that use the latter term, praising

⁴⁶ Bodhi, Bhikkhu, trans. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, Mass: Wisdom Publications 2000, 1525–6.

his carriage as being like a divine vehicle (*brahmayāna-rūpaṃ*). Ānanda, seeing how the people are attracted to this *brahmayāna*, asks the Buddha to describe what among his *dharma* and *vinaya* would be like this vehicle. The prose section has the Buddha saying that it is the Noble Eightfold Path that is “a *brahma* vehicle, a *dharma* vehicle and an unsurpassed victory in battle” (*‘brahmayānaṃ’ iti pi, ‘dhammayānaṃ’ iti pi, ‘anuttaro saṅgāma vijayo*). The verses, on the other hand, make no reference to the Noble Eightfold Path, but rather portray a seemingly random collection of Buddhist virtues as the unsurpassed *brahmayāna*. Note that the Pali text does not use the term *devayāna*. Gombrich nevertheless takes the term *brahmayāna* as an allusion “to that ‘path to Brahman’ that the text of the *Brhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* calls the *devayāna*.” He might be right here, and it is worth noting that the Chinese version of the same *sūtra* does have the Buddha call the vehicle (among other things) both a *devayāna* (天乘) and a *brahmayāna* (梵乘).⁴⁷ Nevertheless, I think it best to read the *brahmayāna* here not as a punning reference to the *devayāna* (or even as a reference to the *brahmayāna magga* of the *Kevaddhasutta*) but as a direct reference

⁴⁷ T. 99, p. 201a1. It is certainly anomalous that this verse would present the *devayāna*, *brahmayāna*, *mahāyāna* and the Noble Eightfold Path as synonymous since most of the later texts in the Canon assign distinct roles to these paths. In addition to the roles of the *deva*- and *brahmayānas* discussed above in regard to the *Kevaddhasutta*, we find a more developed paradigm in the 善臂菩薩 (T. 310 (26)) ascribed to Kumārajīva. It describes two different versions of the three vehicles. In the first version the three vehicles are the *devayāna*, the *brahmayāna* and the *aryayāna*. The *devayāna* consists of the four *dhyānas*, the *brahmayāna* consists of the first three *brahmavihāras* (*karuṇā*, *māitrī* and *pramuditā* – for the idea that the *brahmavihāras* were sometimes seen as *yānas*, see note 57 below). The highest vehicle is the *aryayāna* which consists of the Noble Eightfold Path. This taxonomy of three vehicles is distinct from the next set of three vehicles consisting of the *śrāvakayāna*, *pratyekabuddhayāna* and *Mahāyāna*. The *Jāṇussoṇisūtra*, on the other hand gives us no indication that the *devayāna*, *brahmayāna* and *mahāyāna* represent distinct phases of the path, perhaps reflecting a cosmology more like that behind the *Sutta Nipāta* verse discussed above. My thanks to Jan Nattier for pointing this passage out to me.

to the use of chariots as a literal vehicle for *Brahman* in the *Śrauta* sacrifice. We find this in the *Gopatha Brahmāna*'s commentary on the *Agnyādheya Śrauta* ritual. There the text asserts that the essence (or "rasa") of Brahman becomes the chariot (*ratha*) on which the fire is to be carried to the appropriate altar in the *agnyādheya* rite.⁴⁸ This is cited as the reason why the chariot (in addition to gold and cows) is to be given to the Brahman priest.⁴⁹ Indeed, as M. Sparreboom has amply shown, the chariot is not only used as a metaphor for religious and martial prestige⁵⁰ in Vedic texts, but it is also used as a metaphor (or one could even say metonym) for the sacrifice itself.⁵¹ Thus, the connection between Brahman and the chariot should not be surprising – the heart of the sacrifice lies in the chariot that carries the fire. Under this reading, when Ānanda asks the Buddha to point out the Brahma-vehicle in Buddhism his question is tantamount to asking what the core or essence of Buddhism is.

Here we have what is, in the Pali Canon, the use of the *yāna* metaphor that is closest to its usage in the *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*. Jāṇussoṇi's *yāna* is a chariot employed as a metaphor for a spiritual essence. Further, just like the *Aṣṭa* and the *Ratnaguṇasamcāyagāthā*, the *Jāṇussoṇisutta* presents its *yāna* as alternately a war vehicle and a posh mode of transportation. Yet, since the text falls short of actually using the term *mahāyāna* itself we would be hard pressed to say that Mahāyānists looked to this text as a precedent for their use of the term *mahāyāna*. For that we will have to turn to the Chinese translation of the same text.

⁴⁸ The *agnyādheya* rite is the status rite required for any who wish to establish the three fires in their household.

⁴⁹ B.R. Modak, *The Ancillary Literature of the Atharva-Veda: A Study with Special Reference to the Pariśiṣṭas* (New Delhi: Rashtriya Veda Vidya Pratishthan 1993), 35.

⁵⁰ M. Sparreboom, *Chariots in the Veda* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1985), 13–27.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 75–82.

The equivalent *sūtra* in the Northern tradition is found in the *Samyuktāgama* (T. 99) translated by Guṇabhadra, between 436 and 443 C.E.⁵² Here, we find a number of differences from the Pali, but for our purposes it will suffice to focus on the Buddha's response to Ānanda's query:

The Buddha said to Ānanda, "This common vehicle is not my *dharma*, *vinaya* nor a divine vehicle. Ānanda, my *saddharma* and *vina-ya* vehicle is a vehicle of the gods (天乘 presumably "*devayāna*"), a divine vehicle (婆羅門乘 "*brahmayāna*"), and a great vehicle (大乘 "*mahāyāna*") capable of subduing the army of *kleśas*. Listen carefully, ponder well, and I will explain to you. Ānanda, how is the *sad-dharma* and *vinaya* a vehicle of the gods, a divine vehicle, a great vehicle capable of subduing the army of *kleśas*? It is said to be the Eightfold Noble Path [comprising] Right View, up to Right Concentration. Ānanda this is the so-called vehicle of the true *dharma* and *vinaya*, the vehicle of the gods, Brahmā's vehicle (梵乘), the great vehicle, capable of subduing the army of afflictions. The Blessed one then uttered these verses:

Faith and morality serve as dharma's yoke,
 Shame acts as its tether.
 Right mindfulness protects well and serves as a good charioteer.
Upekṣā (捨) and *samādhi* serve as the poles (on either side of the horse).
 Wisdom and valor are the wheels.
 Detachment and patience are the armor.
 Tranquil, like the dharma itself, it moves.
 Charging straight ahead without turning.
 Forever advancing to the place without sorrow.
 The wise gentleman mounts this battle chariot that crushes ignorance and hatred.⁵³

What is important for our purposes is the high probability that there was a Northern Indic version of the *Jāṇussoṇisūtra* that refers to the

⁵² For a discussion of Guṇabhadra's dates, see Etienne Lamotte, "Trois Sūtra du Saṃyukta sur la Vacuité," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 36/2 (1973, 313–323): 313.

⁵³ T. 99, p. 200c25–201a8.

Noble Eightfold Path as the “*mahāyāna*.” I do not think there is sufficient reason to argue that what we have here is a “contamination”⁵⁴ or an “interpolation”⁵⁵ inserted by an overeager Mahāyānist partisan.⁵⁶ There is no obvious Mahāyāna agenda anywhere in this text

⁵⁴ Jonathan Silk has argued that the *Āgamas* in general are contaminated with Mahāyāna material: “The materials to which we are comparing our extant Mahāyāna Buddhist literature may well have been written or revised in light of that very Mahāyāna Buddhist material itself, and vice versa ad infinitum. Even theoretically, there is no way to produce a clean schematic of the relations in question, any more than it would be possible to clarify a mixture in a glass after orange juice had been poured into soda, that mix poured into coffee, then added back into the orange juice, and so on. The contamination is complete, its history irreversible.” (“What, if Anything, Is Mahāyāna Buddhism? Problems of Definitions and Classifications,” *Numen* 49/4 (2002, 355–405): 397–8.) Dealing with the issue of authenticity and contamination is indeed difficult (see note 56 below) and should not be underestimated. At the end of the day, we can only speak in probabilities concerning the authenticity of any text. However, to claim that the task is impossible is simply to ignore how much *can* be said about these texts – even if the end result falls somewhat short of “proof.”

⁵⁵ Etienne Lamotte, for example, states that the “Mahāyānist interpolations” in the *Ekottarāgama* are “easily discernible.” *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Saka Era*, Sara Webb-Boin trans. (Louvain: L’Institut Orientaliste de Louvain 1988), 156.

⁵⁶ I say “high probability,” since Guṇabhadra’s many other translations were of indisputable Mahāyāna texts, and it is well known that Kumarajīva – a contemporary of Guṇabhadra – may have been a bit overzealous in his translation of terms like *agrayāna* and *śreṣṭhayāna*, *jyeṣṭhadharma* and *agra-dharma* with the same “大乘” in his translations of the *Lotus sūtra* (see Frons-dal, 59–61) and in his translation of the *Vajracchedikā* [see T. 235, p. 750c13]. More to the point, Jan Nattier has pointed out that Guṇabhadra’s translation of the *Samyuktāgama* (T. 99) consistently translates the phrase *ekāyāna maggo* with 一乘道 which points to the One Vehicle, a term that ordinarily populates Mahāyāna texts such as the *Lotus sūtra*, the *Śrīmaladevīsūtra*, and the *Aṅgulimālasūtra*. Indeed, she argues that Guṇabhadra’s choice of translation terms in this *Āgama* text was colored by his translations of Mahāyāna texts that legitimately contained the term *ekāyāna*. Nevertheless, I think it would be hard to argue that Guṇabhadra harbored some covert agenda to slip

Mahāyāna terms into a canonical text, nor does Nattier claim that he was acting in bad faith. At the end of her investigation, she states, “the translation of *ekāyana* as *yisheng dao* is simply a mistake. Conditioned by his exposure to the term *ekayāna* in Mahāyāna texts, and perhaps unfamiliar with the very rare word *ekāyana*, Guṇabhadra may well have assumed that his source-text was mistaken and amended it to read *ekayāna*, which he then rendered into Chinese using the by then well established translation of *yisheng*.” (Jan Nattier, “‘One Vehicle’ (一乘) in the Chinese Āgamas: New Light on an Old Problem in Pāli,” *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism at Soka University* 10 (March 2007): 197).

Unlike the *ekāyana/ekayāna* translation mistake, we cannot make sense of the presence of the term 大乘 in Guṇabhadra’s translation of the *Jāṇussoṇisutta* by a similar appeal to homophony, since we would either have to postulate a term that Guṇabhadra could have misheard as *mahāyāna*, or would have to explain how the *Jāṇussoṇisutta* lends itself to some kind of Mahāyānist agenda. There are a number of terms that theoretically could have been confused with *mahāyāna*, like *mahājñāna*, *mahādhyāna*, etc. [For a good discussion of possible homophones, see Daniel Boucher, “Gāndhārī and the Early Chinese Buddhist Translations Reconsidered: The Case of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118.4 (1998): esp. pp. 492–3.] Nevertheless, homophonic substitution is constrained by syntagmatic context, and this story is clearly about a chariot. Furthermore, the Pali refers unambiguously to *yānas*.

Could Guṇabhadra have simply played author here and inserted the terms *mahāyāna*, *devayāna* and *brahmayāna* into his text? Probably not. Marcus Bingenheimer has done a close comparison between the anonymous translation of the *Samyuktāgama* found in T. 100 with that of Guṇabhadra as well as with Pali parallels where available (Bingenheimer, Marcus. “A Digital Comparative Edition and Translation of the Shorter Chinese Saṃyukta Āgama (T.100).” <http://buddhisticinformatics.ddbc.edu.tw/BZA/> [accessed July 14, 2008]). While T. 100 does not include the *Jāṇussoṇisūtra*, Bingenheimer’s work does tell us a lot about Guṇabhadra’s translation style. In his comparison of extant copies of the *Samyukta* collections he found that T. 99 and T. 100 were very close, and every time T. 99 differed from the Pali Canon, the difference was also there in T. 100. He noticed no places where Guṇabhadra inserted extraneous material and no instances of obvious Mahāyāna interpolation – assuming, of course, that we take his 一乘 translations simply as mistakes. (Marcus Bingenheimer, personal communication 7/25/08). Finally, Guṇabhadra’s use of the word *mahāyāna* in this text does not mesh well with

since the Noble Eightfold Path is not a particularly Mahāyāna idea. Nor is there any indication in this text that the term *mahāyāna* is the most important of the epithets for the Buddhist path. Once the metaphor of spiritual practice as a vehicle was in place, to call the Buddhist *yāna* a “*great yāna*” is hardly a surprising development.⁵⁷

the doctrine of the other Mahāyānist texts he translated. His translation of the *Jāṇussoṇisūtra* uses the term 大乘 to describe the Buddha’s dharma itself. It does not distinguish Mahāyāna from any other form of Buddhist doctrine and, moreover, explicitly states that it is the Noble Eightfold Path. It is tempting to see this text identifying *mahāyāna* with Buddhism itself as a subtle allusion to the doctrine of the One Vehicle found in the *Śrīmāladevisūtra* and the *Aṅgulimālasūtra*. Both texts state that the three vehicles are all found in the Great Vehicle and hence the Great Vehicle is the One Vehicle. However, despite an apparent nod at ecumenicity both *sūtras* are keen to make a firm distinction between Mahāyāna doctrine and that of the *śrāvakas* and *pratyekabuddhas*. More to the point, the *Aṅgulimālasūtra* explicitly states that the *śrāvakayāna*’s Noble Eightfold Path is not Mahāyāna and the Mahāyāna’s Noble Eightfold Path looks nothing like the one described in the *Jāṇussoṇisūtra*. (See esp. T.120, p.532a24–b1). Thus, the term *mahāyāna* in the *Jāṇussoṇisūtra* of T. 99 was probably not inserted by Guṇabhadra since it conveys a picture of Mahāyāna that contradicts the other Mahāyāna texts he was interested in. Carrying this argument a bit further, we can also say that the picture of *mahāyāna* we glean from the *Jāṇussoṇisūtra* is unlike that of any other Mahāyāna text of which I am aware. All of this suggests to me that this word was in the text prior to the advent of Mahāyāna, since it would be difficult to imagine someone consciously using an already loaded term in such a contextually naïve way.

⁵⁷ There is one other context in the Pali canon where “*yāna*” may be interpreted as a spiritual practice. There are quite a number of passages in which the stock phrase “[*x*] *bahulikātā yānikatā vatthukatā...*” (*x* is made great, is made into a *yāna*, is made into a ground...) occurs. This phrase is used in two contexts. The first occurs in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* (and all the texts that reference this conversation), in which the Buddha tells Ānanda, “... whoever has developed the four roads to power (*iddhipādā*), practiced them frequently, made them his vehicle, made them his base, established them, become familiar with them and properly undertaken them, could undoubtedly live for a century. The Tathāgata has developed these powers...” [Walshe, *The Long Discourses*, 246; DN II 103].

Nor do we find here any distinction being made between this practice and any other form of Buddhist practice. The only contrast here is between Vedic Hinduism (Jāṇussoṇi is a stock Brahmin character in the *Tripitaka*) and Buddhism. The only available reading of this passage is that Buddhism itself (especially the Eightfold Path) is the Great Vehicle.⁵⁸ In other words, we have here a text

The second context is discussions of the “six elements leading to deliverance” (the *cha nissaraṇīyā dhātuyo*), these are referenced quite a number of places as well [e.g. DN III 244–5, AN III 324–6, IV 300, *Paṭisaṃbhidāmagga* II 131ff. etc.]. The basic structure of the passages reads as follows:

Six Elements making for deliverance (*nissaraṇīyā dhātuyo*): Here, a monk might say: (a) “I have developed the emancipation of the heart (*ceto-vimutti*) by loving-kindness (*mettā*), expanded it, made it a vehicle and a base, established, worked well on it, set it well in train. And yet ill-will still grips my heart.” He should be told: “No! do not say that! Do not misrepresent the Blessed Lord, it is not right to slander him thus, for he would not have said such a thing! Your words are unfounded and impossible. If you develop the emancipation of the heart through loving-kindness, ill-will has no chance to envelop your heart. This emancipation through loving-kindness is the cure for ill-will.” [Walshe, *The Long Discourses*, 500; DN III 247–8].

This is repeated for each of the six *nissaraṇīyā dhātuyo*, pitting each of the six techniques to achieve *ceto-vimutti* (i.e., *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā*, *animittā*, and aversion [*vigata*] to the idea of *ātman*) against each of the respective hindrances to liberation (*byāpāda*, *vihesā*, *arati*, *rāga*, *nimitta-anusāri* and *vicikicchā-kathaṅkathā-salla*). Unfortunately, neither the occurrences of this term in the root texts nor the commentaries thereupon give any indication whether *yāna* as path or *yāna* as vehicle is being indicated in this phrase.

⁵⁸ Vetter points out one more verse in Pali that is similar in imagery. This occurs in the Bhikkhunī Subhā’s verses in the *Therīgāthā* (verse 389 in PTS, verse 391 in CSCD): *Sāhaṃ sugatassa sāvika, maggaṭṭhaṅgikayānayāyini; uddhaṭasallā anāsavā, suññāgāragatā ramāmaḥaṃ*. Caroline Rhys-Davids translates this as, “Yea, the disciple am I of the Welcome One; onward the march of me. Riding the Car of the Road that is Eightfold. Drawn are the arrows out of my wounds, and purged is my spirit of drugging Intoxicants. So I am come to haunts that are Empty. There lies my pleasure.” [Caroline Rhys-Davids, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists* (London: Pali Text Society, 1980), 153]. Regarding this verse, Vetter (p. 64, note 23) makes some interesting observations on this verse: “... the demands of metre and the attempt for tonal

that uses the word Mahāyāna, which does not in fact appear to be what we would call “a *mahāyāna* text.” Does it pre-date the advent of (what we would call) Mahāyāna? I think that it does, but even if this cannot be established, this *sūtra* still presents us with a usage of the word *mahāyāna* that remained quite independent of what we would call Mahāyāna even in the 5th century.

The Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra: yāna across the river

The idea that Buddhism itself is a great vehicle shows up in one other *āgamic* text. It occurs in the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, although again only in Chinese translations. The episode occurs at the point when the Buddha wishes to cross a river outside of Rājagṛha. The earliest translation of this episode into Chinese is ascribed to Zhī Qiān⁵⁹ sometime in the second quarter of the third century. The passage in question reads as follows:

At that time there was a crowd of people who boarded boats to cross (the river). There were those who boarded small boats, and boarded bamboo rafts and wooden rafts to cross. There were many such travelers. The Buddha sat in *samādhi* and thought: “In the past when I had not yet become Buddha, I came here repeatedly and boarded these boats more times than I can count. Now that I am emancipated, (I) no longer board them, but I will enable my disciples to be free of them.” When the Buddha awoke, he said the following verses:

The Buddha is the Capitan of the ocean ship. The Dharma Bridge crosses the river. The *Great Vehicle* is the carriage of the Way.

effect result in *maggaṭṭhaṅgikayānāyāyinī* expressing, rather awkwardly, the fact that a nun treads the eight-fold way. *yāna* here is not something with which she has herself transported; rather, she herself effects her movement, i.e., by her practice of an eightfold discipline. This discipline is normally indicated by the word *magga*, but *magga* of the relevant compound, its meaning superseded by that of *yāna* has become only a superfluous qualifier for *aṭṭhaṅgikayāna*.”

⁵⁹ For the ascription of this to Zhī Qiān, see Nattier, *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations*, 126–8.

Each delivers gods and men and indeed produces liberation, delivering (those gods and men) to the (other) shore to attain transcendence. They enable my disciples to loosen their bonds and attain *nirvāṇa*.⁶⁰

The same verse can also be found in Buddhayaśas' translation of the *Dīrghāgama*, completed between 408 and 412, though the prose prelude differs somewhat.⁶¹ This pericope of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra* plays upon the etymology of the word *saṃsāra*. “*Sam-sāra*” comes from the root \sqrt{sr} , meaning “to flow.”⁶² The “flow” of the river itself is *saṃsāra*. With the river as *saṃsāra*, Buddhism is the “great vehicle” (*mahāyāna* – here perhaps as a boat instead of a chariot) ferrying men and gods across to the other side. The verse also picks up on another common theme in the *Tripitaka*, namely that the Buddha's dharma is that which one holds onto in order to cross the “flood” (Pali, *ogham*⁶³). Again, as with the

⁶⁰ T. 6, p178a24–b3. The verse in Zhī Qiān's translation appears as:

佛為海船師	法橋渡河津
大乘道之典	一切渡天人
亦為自解脫	度岸得昇仙
都使諸弟子	縛解致泥洹

Buddhayaśas' translation of the same verse is virtually identical in the first two lines with the exception that he substitutes 輿 for T. 6's 典. This makes better sense to me in context and I think it is likely that 典 is a copyist's mistake. I have translated the verse accordingly.

⁶¹ There are actually a number of different versions of this scene. Ernst Waldschmidt, in his study of the different versions of the *Mahāparinirvāṇasūtra*, gives the greatest attention to Mūlasarvāstivādin sources. Though he summarizes three Chinese versions of this scene, he fails to mention that two of them liken the path to a great vehicle. See Ernst Waldschmidt, *Die Überlieferung vom Lebensende des Buddha*, first part, groups I–IV (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1944), 60–65

⁶² Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit Dictionary*, “ \sqrt{sr} ,” s.v.

⁶³ See, e.g., SN 1069, “Alone (and) without a support, Sakyan', said the venerable Upasīva, ‘I am not able to cross over the great flood. One with all-round vision, tell me an object (of meditation), supported by which I may

Samyuktāgama passage, the image of a “great vehicle” appears to be quite natural to the setting (it has to be large, after all, to convey both gods and men across) and like the *Jāṇussoṇi* passage, does not appear to be forwarding any obviously Mahāyāna agenda. Indeed, this passage may well have been the inspiration for cases such as the *Daśabhūmikasūtra* in which the Mahāyāna is referred to as the *mahāyānapātra* (the Great Boat).⁶⁴ Thus, to the extent that we can establish that this verse accurately reflects an Indic original⁶⁵ we can argue that as early as the first half of the third century (and probably earlier), there was at least one version of the river crossing episode that included a verse in which the Buddha refers to Buddhism itself as a “great vehicle” capable of delivering gods and men across the waters of *saṃsāra*. Like the *Jāṇussoṇi* passage discussed above, the passage in question has nothing to do with Mahāyāna in contradistinction to any other form of Buddhism. Rather it is Buddhism itself that is referred to as “the Great Vehicle.”

Conclusion

At this point, I would like to offer a few observations by way of a conclusion and to suggest fruitful avenues for future inquiry. My argument can be divided into two parts. The first part traces vari-

cross over this flood.” Norman, 120. [=CSCD paragraph 1075:] *Eko ahaṃ sakka mahantamoḥaṃ, (iccāyasmā upasīvo) anissito no visahāmi tārituṃ; ārammaṇaṃ brūhi samantacakkhu, yaṃ nissito oghamimaṃ tareyyaṃ.*

⁶⁴ P.L. Vaidya, ed. *Daśabhūmikasūtram*, (Darbhanga: The Mithila Institute of Post-Graduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning 1967) 40; T. 286, p.521b19–20.

⁶⁵ The issues surrounding the accuracy or authenticity of Zhī Qiān’s translation is much more complicated than that of Guṇabhadra’s, and a number of variables must be taken into consideration. In all, I believe that this verse probably does accurately translate an Indic original, although there is still considerable room for doubt. For a full discussion and arguments for and against, see my, “On the Authenticity of a verse from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*” (forthcoming).

ous contexts in early Indic literature that had to be in place in order for a term like *mahāyāna* as Great Vehicle to become meaningful. While the term *mahāyāna* does not appear in the Pali Canon proper, the metaphoric complex into which it fits was certainly in place among its later strata. It appears to be an organic outgrowth of specifically Buddhist appropriations of the Upaniṣadic idea of the *devayāna patha* cross-pollinated with Śrauta metaphors of the sacrifice as chariot and more generally Indic ideas of vehicle *vimānas* as a reflection of religious practice. Thus, when the term actually does appear in Chinese translations of the *Dīrgha-* and *Samyuktāgama*, we should not rush to see its presence there as an interpolation or xenotype of a partisan nature but rather consider the possibility that it appears there as a non-technical term, an organic development of elements that were already there. Further, when we find Mahāyāna texts talking about the *mahāyāna*, they may well be referring to a term that was already in vogue among Buddhists who were not in pursuit of the bodhisattva path. On the other hand, the fact that we find this usage in texts translated between the first half of the third and the beginning of the fifth centuries suggests that Buddhists continued to use the term *mahāyāna* in a non-Mahāyāna way even after the proliferation of Mahāyāna texts.

This part of the argument has a few implications for the future study of early Mahāyāna and the origins thereof. For the term *mahāyāna* to be coined as a spiritual metaphor, other ideas on whose authority it draws would have to be in place. The *devayāna patha* of the *Upaniṣads* alone would probably not be sufficient since it is far from clear that early Brahmanic sources “heard” its *yāna* as a vehicle. The literary context most conducive to the use of the term *mahāyāna* in the semantic range that we have come to expect would have to have already normalized the term *devayāna* as a vehicle of the gods. Further, if I am correct that such a technical usage only occurred in the context of discussions of post-mortem *vimānas*, then we should also look for a context in which a corresponding belief in such vehicles was *du jour*. Placing early Mahāyāna in the context of the *Vimānavatthu*, the *Tattvārthasūtra*,

the *Śānti Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* and the later chapters of the *Milindapañha*, of course, hardly helps us in dating the origins of the movement since it opens up more chronological cans of worms than I care to deal with here. But it is a different tub of worms than scholars of Mahāyāna are used to wading through and so at least presents a change of scenery. Nor would our work be completed even if we could date the invention of the word “Mahāyāna.” It is quite probable that a movement that we can meaningfully call “Mahāyāna” pre-existed the term itself. Nevertheless, the invention of the term does appear to be an important piece of the puzzle since it reflects something of the worldview of those who adopted it and the expectations of (imagined) audiences whom they addressed.

The second part of the paper argues that two passages in the Chinese translation of the *Āgamas* contain usages of the term *mahāyāna* that appear to be a kind of missing link between earlier ideas such as the *devayāna patha* and the term “Mahāyāna” used as a designation for the bodhisattva path in contradistinction to the Śrāvaka path. Though my argument for the authenticity of its presence in the *Āgamas* is not unassailable, neither can it be ruled out easily. If the word *mahāyāna* does occur there – and I have argued that these passages would be rather odd as conscious interpolations by Mahāyānist partisans – its presence would be independent of (and oblivious to) the any kind of partisan form of Mahāyāna. For that reason I see no reason to assume that it post-dates the advent of such a movement. If the term “Mahāyāna” was used in some Buddhist texts in a non-sectarian way independent of (or prior to) its adoption as a moniker by any particular Buddhist group, then we must be open to the possibility that the word *mahāyāna* evolved within the *Āgamas* themselves. By the same token, if the word *mahāyāna* evolved in the *Tripitaka* itself, and (if, as Paul Harrison has argued)⁶⁶ our earliest Mahāyāna texts are second genera-

⁶⁶ Harrison has discussed this problem in two works: “The Earliest Chinese Translations of Mahāyāna Buddhist Sūtras: Some Notes on the Works of Lokakṣema,” *Buddhist Studies Review* 10/2 (1993, 135–177): 139–40; and,

tion texts then the first generation of Mahāyāna texts might not be Mahāyāna texts at all, but rather texts from the Āgamas themselves, put to a different purpose.⁶⁷

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⁶⁷ This was a suggestion first made by Jan Nattier in regard to the Jātakas, but may apply equally well to a number of other texts in the Sūtra Piṭaka. See Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, 186.