

Gender Equity in a Mahayana Sutra: The *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s Enlightened Goddesses

HILLARY LANGBERG

MAHAYANA SUTRAS, largely composed in the first half of the first millennium CE, are situated within the normative gender hierarchies of the ancient cultures of South Asia. Therefore, for the most part, they do not espouse gender equity.¹ This vast textual corpus has constituted and informed the teachings and praxis of Buddhism across Asia both historically and today, inclusive of the fairly recent entrance of Zen and Tibetan traditions in the West. Such texts include the highly revered *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*, which has itself long been personified as a goddess who continues to be honored in both Eastern and Western Buddhist traditions. As explored further below, Mahayana sutras made certain doctrinal concessions to female practitioners who aspired to take up the bodhisattva vow, particularly when we compare female access to the path toward buddhahood in Mahayana versus mainstream texts.² Nonetheless, as numerous scholars have noted, Mahayana sutras appear to generally prohibit

THIS ARTICLE has been greatly improved thanks to the comments, suggestions, and careful corrections of the anonymous reviewers for *The Eastern Buddhist* to whom I am most grateful. I also wish to wholeheartedly thank Claire Maes for reading an earlier version of this manuscript and providing numerous helpful insights. Lastly, I am fortunate to have had the pleasure of working with the editorial staff of *The Eastern Buddhist*, particularly John LoBreglio, who I thank for his kindness and generous efforts. Any errors that remain are entirely my own. For purposes of brevity, original Sanskrit passages are supplied only when the rendering of specific terms directly impacts my argument. Please refer to the abbreviations list at the close of this study for the editions from which I draw my translations, and links to digitized formats available via the Göttingen Registry of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (GRETIL).

¹ While acknowledging the semantic difference between “equity” (equal treatment) and “equality” (the state of being equal), as well as the potential usefulness of this distinction as a tool for future research, I take the two terms as virtually synonymous in this study for the sake of simplicity. Further, in this analysis of premodern contexts, I take the terms “gender” and “sex” as synonymous solely due to their prior conflation.

² I here use “mainstream” to designate non-Mahayana texts after Nattier 2000, p. 75, n. 19, as well as Harrison 1990, p. xviii, n. 8.

female devotees from advancing to the highest levels of bodhisattvahood until they have been reborn as male. The present article focuses on a notable exception among the numerous Mahayana sutras disseminated and translated into Chinese during the middle period of Indian Buddhism (ca. 0–600 CE): the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*.³ I suggest that this text puts female bodhisattvas on an equal footing with most of its advanced and enlightened male bodhisattvas.⁴ I also assert that there is an urgency to revisit this text as evidence of a shift in the attitudes of Mahayana Buddhist authors toward the representation of female bodhisattva enlightenment, particularly because issues of soteriological equity had—and continue to have—a gendered impact on Buddhist audiences.⁵

The *Gaṇḍavyūha* (Supreme Array) *Sutra*, which forms the final section of the *Avataṃsaka* (Flower Garland) *Sutra*, has been greatly influential in East Asia.⁶ This is particularly true in the Chan 禪 tradition of China that was foundational to Korean Son Buddhism as well as Japanese—and now Western—traditions of Zen. In South and Southeast Asia, murals depicting scenes from the *Gaṇḍavyūha* are found on monuments as far-flung as Borobudur in Java and Tabo Monastery in Himachal Pradesh,

³ Schopen has previously defined the middle period of Indian Buddhism as stretching “from the first to the fifth century” (2000, p. 12) or “the period from the beginning of the Common Era to the fifth/sixth century” (2000, p. 11). I suggest that the middle period is best understood as extending to at least the close of the sixth century (ca. 0–600 CE), in order to encompass the many Mahayana ritual and visual innovations of this era, which overlap with early tantric developments. I therefore define it as such.

⁴ As I discuss in depth below, the bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra appear to have attained a higher level of enlightenment than any of the other virtuous friends. This is quite possibly the case for the bodhisattva Maitreya, as well, yet remains a question for future study.

⁵ Yet what sort of audiences can we assert that these texts had? The demographics of the sutras’ audiences (e.g., male versus female), along with the modes of sutra circulation, have doubtlessly fluctuated over time and across regions. In middle-period Mahayana contexts, however, we know that it was commonplace for a sutra to repeatedly stress the need for its circulation by adherents who were not distinguished along gender lines. Many Mahayana sutras describe the necessity of oral Dharma transmission by Buddhist preachers (*dharmabhāṅakas*), who appear to have been male but would likely have preached to audiences encompassing all genders. In terms of female audiences of Buddhist texts, I discuss evidence from studies by both Appleton (2011) and Levering (1997) below. We also have numerous instances of biographical narratives (“*avadānas*”) in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* (hereafter “Gv” in the notes) that, while not discussing human biographies, nonetheless provide a precedent that it was not unusual for women to receive Dharma transmission or to plant meritorious roots in the presence of a buddha. On this, see Osto 2008. For more on women and goddesses as text audiences, see Skilling 2001.

⁶ Here I include the updated English translation of the Gv’s title, “Supreme Array,” as put forward by Osto (2009b). In alignment with Osto’s cogent study, I suggest that we understand the text’s “supreme array” as the sum total of numerous *vyūhas* displayed by Buddha Vairocana and the fifty-three *kalyāṇa-mitras* (“virtuous friends”) for the pilgrim Sudhana. See, for example, Osto 2009b, p. 284. I define “*vyūha*” as a virtuous friend’s manifest—and in many cases metaphorical—display of the power of the interpenetrative enlightened mind (i.e., *dharmadhātu*) on earth (Jambudvīpa).

India. This well-known, circa mid-third-century sutra defines and explicates bodhisattvahood much as we do today.⁷ The text presents a narrative sequence of fifty-three *kalyāṇa-mitras*, or “virtuous friends,” who act as teachers of the pilgrim Sudhana on his quest to ascend to the highest level (or *bhūmi*) of the bodhisattva path, that is, to achieve complete and perfect enlightenment (i.e., buddhahood, *samyaksambodhi*).⁸ The virtuous friends each detail their dedication to saving beings from worldly dangers and delusions as well as guiding them on the arduously long path of a bodhisattva’s attainment of enlightenment.

While all fifty-three virtuous friends display attainments characteristic of bodhisattvas, the authors of the *Gaṅḍavyūha* name just five as “bodhisattvas” explicitly.⁹ The title is assigned only to the great enlightened male bodhisattvas, most of whom are well-known as interlocutors of the Buddha in other Mahayana sutras. They are: Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara, Ananyagāmin, Maitreya, and Samantabhadra.¹⁰ The remaining forty-eight teachers, whether they be male or female bodhisattvas, are not given the title. From this, Osto speculates that the term “appears to be reserved for only those good friends who have achieved a particularly advanced state on the bodhisattva’s path . . . [as] the most spiritually developed teachers.”¹¹ I propose a different reasoning for the

⁷ The earliest Chinese translation of the Gv, by the monk Shengjian 聖堅 (d.u.), dates sometime between 388 and 408 CE. That said, Gómez (1967) dates the *terminus ante quem* of the Gv to a time prior to the composition of the *Daśabhūmika Sutra* (first translated by Dharmarakṣa [265–313 CE]). Following Gómez, I therefore assign to the Gv a provisional *terminus ante quem* of the mid-third century CE, prior to its incorporation into the larger *Avatamsaka Sutra*, along with the *Daśabhūmika Sutra* (1967, p. lxxiv). Landesman (2020, p. 17, n. 56) concurs with this dating of the text, citing further detailed evidence from Gómez’s study. Osto (2009a, p. 166), furthermore, provides important information on the Gv’s textual history, and Gómez (1967, p. xxiv) first notes sections present in the fifth-century translation by Buddhābhadrā (ca. 418–421 CE) that do not appear in the earlier translation by Shengjian. I take these sections into consideration in my analysis below.

⁸ *Samyaksambodhi*, which I take to be “buddhahood” and the ultimate soteriological goal of the text, appears 168 times in the Gv (inclusive of variant endings); *anuttara* (“unsurpassed”) precedes this term just four times.

⁹ Like Osto (2008, p. 27), Levering before him noted that all of the virtuous friends “should be considered bodhisattvas,” yet also that only a handful of male bodhisattvas are named as such (1997, p. 154).

¹⁰ The great enlightened (male) bodhisattvas have often been referred to as “celestial” in prior scholarship. I avoid this term following the arguments of Harrison 2000.

¹¹ This statement (Osto 2008, p. 10) does not align with the author’s argument that the virtuous friends seem to become progressively more advanced when we consider (1) their relative positioning in the text’s narrative sequence and (2), to use Osto’s terminology, the “statement[s] of ignorance” (2008, p. 46) of both Avalokiteśvara and Ananyagāmin. I discuss the Gv’s “statements of ignorance” trope in section five below. Osto does, however, note that the nun Śiṃhavijṛmbhitā’s attainments appear to be of the tenth stage (2008, p. 94). This, too, conflicts with his reading of the text as a generally “hierarchical arrangement” of the *kalyāṇa-mitras*, namely that the level of attainment of each virtuous friend is slightly higher than their predecessor. See Osto 2008, p. 28. The reading makes perfect sense given the overall framework of the bodhisattva Maitreya’s *kūṭāgāra* (“peaked dwelling”) revealed in the

absence of the “bodhisattva” title for the remainder of the sutra’s virtuous friends. As demonstrated in section two below, the very concept of an advanced or irreversible female bodhisattva goes against the status quo in Mahayana doctrine during this time, and the text’s author(s) doubtlessly wished to be taken as legitimate. Yet, rather than omit the title “bodhisattva” solely in the case of female bodhisattvas, they chose not to apply the term for the vast majority of the *kalyāṇa-mitras*, most of whom clearly display advanced bodhisattva attainments. Whatever the motivation for the broad-based omission of the term by the author(s), I will present strong evidence for the achievement of tenth-stage enlightenment by the night goddesses (*rātridevatā*), and thus the equitable status of these female bodhisattvas with the great male bodhisattvas in the text.

Twenty-one of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*’s virtuous friends, almost 50 percent, are female; eleven are goddesses.¹² Scholars have described the goddesses in this text as “advanced beings well on their way to enlightenment”¹³ and as “hav[ing] achieved a very advanced stage of religious development.”¹⁴ Generally, the goddesses’ ability to carry out the supramundane practice of *vikurvāṇa*—that is, to miraculously produce myriad emanations (*nirmāṇa*) in any form necessary to teach beings—would qualify them as advanced bodhisattvas.¹⁵ Levering’s is the sole study that goes so far as to affirm that the divine female teachers of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* are indeed “enlightened.”¹⁶ She does not, however, engage in a discussion of evidence for this assertion. It would perhaps be a trivial matter to attempt to gauge the soteriological level (or bodhisattva *bhūmi*) of these goddesses, who multiple scholars have discussed as being clearly advanced in their attainments, were it not for the fact that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (and a host of other sutras) obscures their bodhisattva status. While their powers and attainments seem much the same as their male counterparts, the consistent effort on the part of Mahayana authors to resist naming advanced female practitioners as “bodhisattvas”—in texts dating to at least as late as the sixth century CE—puts them at a clear rhetori-

closing of the text, and indeed this seems to be the case generally. Yet, multiple inconsistencies in this hierarchy arise—of which *Siṃhavijṛmbhitā* is a perfect example. I suggest a valid reason for this in the latter part of this study (see section five).

¹² Scholars including Levering (1997), Shaw (2006), and Osto (2008) have noted the unusually large number of narratives centering on female figures in the text, as well as their advanced bodhisattva status. Levering and Shaw are among the few scholars who have focused specifically on the characterization of goddesses in middle-period Mahayana sutras.

¹³ Shaw 2006, p. 160.

¹⁴ Osto 2008, p. 98.

¹⁵ To add to this conception, Osto states that the goddesses are advanced because they are said to possess a *dharmakāya* in the text, and thus must primarily reside in the *dharmadhātu*, a point which I will elaborate on further below (2008, p. 98).

¹⁶ Levering (1997, p. 165) uses the term “enlightened” in reference to the advanced female “goddess-bodhisattvas” of the *Gv* indirectly, yet unmistakably, in her conclusion (1997, p. 156).

cal disadvantage.¹⁷ The present study thus suggests that we take seriously the question of the shifting attitudes of Buddhist authors toward the concept of advanced (and even enlightened) female bodhisattvas—whether human or divine—during this time period. My central aim here, in order to foreground the somewhat hidden status of these important figures, is therefore to assess the bodhisattva *bhūmi* of select goddesses of the *Gaṅḍavyūha*. This analysis demonstrates the equitable soteriological status of highly-advanced male and female bodhisattvas in the text, regardless of their gender or possession of the explicit title of “bodhisattva.”

In undertaking such a study of the text's soteriology, then, we must attempt to determine the point at which the *Gaṅḍavyūha* assigns “enlightened” status to bodhisattvas generally. This entails determining precisely where among the ten—and at points eleven—stages of bodhisattvahood that enlightenment occurs.¹⁸ A major issue at stake in this investigation is that scholars rarely confront or agree upon the details of bodhisattva enlightenment. For example, is it accurate to say that bodhisattvas delay “unsurpassed, complete and perfect enlightenment” (*anuttara samyaksambodhi*) out of compassion for all beings? In contrast to what Western scholars have asserted for decades, Buswell and Lopez have recently suggested that this is not the case.¹⁹ Further, when do we understand bodhisattvas to actually achieve enlightenment (if not full and complete buddhahood)? The two central, if diverging, sources that scholars take as definitive of the bodhisattva *bhūmi* system—the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* treatise and, primarily, the *Daśabhūmika Sutra*—seem to suggest that enlightenment is only attained at the tenth *bhūmi*. Gómez's important work has, in turn, focused on the ontology of the progressive levels of bodhisattvahood as they are specifically laid out in the *Gaṅḍavyūha Sutra*.²⁰ The present study takes Gómez's work as a starting point, delving into the subtleties of the enlightenment process in the sutra, and its important contribution to bodhisattva ontology and Mahayana soteriology more broadly.

There are two major points of significance for such an inquiry. The first, while beyond the scope of the present article, speaks to the development of goddess reverence in middle-period Mahayana Buddhism, potentially in connection with the role of goddesses as bodhisattvas of the highest levels of attainment. The second point is of primary significance for addressing the particular question of the status of the female bodhisattvas in the text; namely that the prohibition and/or allowance of advanced (and even enlightened) female bodhisattvas in Mahayana texts has impacted male and,

¹⁷ Cf. Gross's (1993, pp. 173–80) feminist reading of Mahayana contexts, which sees arguments on “gender and emptiness” as “androcentric” in nature.

¹⁸ In the Gv, the *tathāgatabhūmi*—as in other Mahayana sources—is the level beyond the tenth *bhūmi* (i.e., the *abhiṣekha* or “coronation” stage); cf. Jorgensen et al. 2019, pp. 35–36, n. 52.

¹⁹ See Buswell and Lopez 2013, p. 13.

²⁰ See Gómez 1977.

particularly, female Buddhist audiences both historically and today. I, therefore, aim to demonstrate here the level of bodhisattvahood that select female divinities of this text have attained, henceforth referred to as “bodhisattva-goddesses.” Given the complex and innovative bodhisattva ontology of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, as well as what Gómez refers to as the “desultory” or rambling and repetitive nature of the text, we will see that such an undertaking is hardly straightforward.²¹ It is, nonetheless, an attainable goal.

This study is divided into five sections. Part one discusses the importance of analyzing Buddhist texts through the lens of gender, emphasizing the impact that gendered soteriology has had on female audiences. Part two then presents—as much as possible—a diachronic textual history of Mahayana Buddhist prohibitions on advanced female bodhisattvahood (or, in Theravada Buddhism, female bodhisattvahood altogether). I suggest that this textual history supports the position that a shift can be seen in the attitude of the authors toward female bodhisattvahood in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*. Further, by means of innovations in bodhisattva ontology (i.e., the doctrine of the *dharmadhātu*, or Dharma realm, discussed in section three), the text facilitates the permissibility and presence of enlightened female bodhisattvas. In section four, I then provide evidence for this presence, by comparing select goddess narratives with the text’s *bodhisattvajanmas*, or bodhisattva birth stages.²² I argue that these birth stages correspond to an early system of bodhisattva *bhūmis* laid out in the text. While explicating my reasoning further in section four below, I take the term *abhisambodhi*, or “perfect enlightenment”²³—as it is given in the ninth of the *bodhisattvajanmas*²⁴—as a potential indicator of the enlightened state more broadly, thus encompassing the attainment of advanced bodhisattvas, in contrast to the (unsurpassed) complete and perfect enlightenment—(*anuttara*) *samyaksambodhi*—that is full buddhahood.²⁵ In section four, my comparative translation and analysis therefore suggests that *abhisambodhi* is expressed by ninth stage bodhisattvas, and specifically bodhisattva-goddesses, in the text.²⁶ Ultimately, however, as I point out in section five, the text’s narrative sequence of *kalyāṇa-mitras* implicitly introduces female bodhisattvas, and the rest of the virtuous friends, as emanated (*nirmita*) forms of the great bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. Prior scholar-

²¹ Gómez 1977, p. 227.

²² Gv 285.21–290.16. Cf. Gómez 1977, which shows a keen apprehension to find any doctrinal systemization in the text, though nonetheless delves into an analysis of the *janmabhūmi* passages.

²³ Cf. Edgerton (1953) 2014, vol. 2, p. 59.

²⁴ Gv 288.3–11.

²⁵ Q.v. n. 8. Further comparative work across texts is necessary to buttress my proposed distinction of the two terms in this preliminary study.

²⁶ *Abhisambodhi* (inclusive of variant endings) appears forty times in the Gv. In thirteen instances it immediately precedes “*vikurvita*” and once “*vikurvāṇa*.” Both terms refer to an enlightened being’s supernatural ability to create emanations (*nirmāṇa*), which include *vyūha*, or “arrayed visions.” Cf. Gv 288.3–11.

ship has not addressed the significance of this specified system of bodhisattva emanation in the text. As emanations, these virtuous friends each demonstrate their singular *vyūha*—a magical manifestation or emanation (*nirmāṇa*) of the Dharma realm, which takes the form of an arrayed vision. Related to that *vyūha*, each, in turn, has their own biography and specialized *vimokṣa* (literally “liberation” or teaching) to impart to the pilgrim Sudhana. In sum, my overarching argument here is that, through a careful philological analysis of the bodhisattva *bhūmis* of the *Gaṅḍavyūha*, it is possible to suggest that we do indeed see enlightened bodhisattva-goddesses in this circa third-century text, even in sections that form part of the earliest redaction.²⁷ Moreover, the structure of the text functions to support a multiplicity of teachers who appear as enlightened emanations of a well-known great (male) bodhisattva.

1. The Significance of Studying Gender in Buddhist Texts

Prior studies of the Pali canon have emphasized that the bodhisattva path to full buddhahood is not relegated only to followers of Mahayana traditions, as has been commonly assumed.²⁸ Although arahatship is by far the most prevalent goal of “Nikāya” or mainstream Buddhism, as Appleton notes, “Theravāda texts . . . preserve an outline of the *bodhisatta* [Skt. *bodhisattva*] path both as part of the extended biography of Gotama Buddha and as an example that Theravāda Buddhists may aspire to follow.”²⁹ Long-standing doctrinal gender biases limit women in Theravada traditions not only from attaining buddhahood, but from embarking on the *bodhisatta* path altogether.³⁰

²⁷ Q.v. n. 7. Gómez (1967, p. xxiv) notes sections absent from the earliest Chinese translation (T no. 294) by the monk Shengjian sometime between 388 and 408. This version, as Osto writes, “ends abruptly after the thirty-fourth good friend, the night goddess Pramuditāyanajagadvirocānā” (Osto 2009a, p. 166, n. 7). The first complete translation into Chinese was made by Buddhahadra, ca. 420 CE.

²⁸ These are studies undertaken by Samuels (1997) and Appleton (2011). Samuels sees a false scholarly bifurcation of the bodhisattva path toward buddhahood in what he terms “Nikāya” versus Mahayana texts. The system of bodhisattva *bhūmis* appears solely in the Mahayana corpus, however.

²⁹ Appleton 2011, p. 34. Moreover, Samuels provides evidence that certain elite members of the Theravada tradition, including “numerous” kings, monks, and scribes, adhered to the bodhisattva path to attain buddhahood (1997, p. 407). He emphasizes the connection between kings and bodhisattvas, further stating: “Though a link may be established between these bodhisattva kings and Mahāyāna Buddhism, this does not dismiss the fact that the bodhisattva ideal was taken seriously by Theravāda kings or that the bodhisattva ideal has a place in Theravāda Buddhist theory and practice” (1997, p. 39). Thus, he believes that Mahayana doctrine and practice likely influenced the Theravadins’ soteriological choice.

³⁰ The *Majjhima Nikāya*, as Appleton notes at the outset of her study, “famously . . . declare[s] it impossible for a woman to be a fully awakened Buddha” as does the *Anguttara Nikāya* and “various Chinese sources” (2011, pp. 33–34). See Appleton 2011, p. 33, n. 1, as well as Anālayo’s 2009 study for scholarly debates on these passages. Moreover, as discussed further below, male gender is one of eight restricting factors for individuals aspiring to achieve buddhahood in the *Buddhavaṃsa* (the

In her study of the *Lotus Sutra*, Peach emphasizes gender “as an important category for analysis” in that it “provides a basis for evaluating people’s capacity for realizing the Mahāyāna [and at points mainstream] ideal of full Buddhahood.”³¹ Access to buddhahood is hierarchically gendered, which in turn stems from perceived discrepancies in a practitioner’s “capabilities” and “virtues” on the basis of biological sex.³² Moreover, according to Dhammadinnā, the many Buddhist narratives that reflect gendered soteriology are also “pedagogical.”³³ Thus, by teaching audiences the proper path, they continuously reify gender-biased ideologies and, as per Dhammadinnā, male-dominated “authority.”³⁴ After all, as the literature makes clear, the Buddha “was never imagined as female.”³⁵

Extending these theoretical conceptions into real time, Appleton argues that while striving to attain buddhahood is an exceptional soteriological goal in Theravada Buddhism, denying women access to it nonetheless prevents “their ability to lead the Buddhist community, as well as . . . pursue the highest spiritual goal.”³⁶ She then cites specific interviews with Buddhist women in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia that demonstrate the psychological impact of barring women from buddhahood and bodhisattvahood even today. This androcentric paradigm, she writes, “sends a broader message to women about their spiritual capabilities,” namely that they are lacking the level of merit or good karma necessary to have been born male.³⁷ By contrast, scholars including Kajiyama argue that barring women from buddhahood was essentially a non-issue

canonicity of which has been disputed) as well as the *Nidāna-kathā* commentary on the text. For further discussion of the eight conditions and the soteriological restrictions placed on women’s bodhisattvahood in the Theravada tradition, see Endo (1997) 2002, Appleton 2011, and Anālayo 2015. There are, however, minimal examples of extracanonical tales that imagine Gotama Buddha/Śākyamuni as female in a past life. See, for example, Dimitrov 2004, Ohnuma 2000, Jaini 2001, Derris 2008, and Anālayo 2015.

³¹ Peach 2002, p. 50. Furthermore, Sponberg (1992) discusses issues inherent in ancient Buddhists’ failure to distinguish between categories of biological sex and socially-constructed gender. Thus, the terms “gender” and “biological sex” are used synonymously in the present study.

³² Peach 2002, p. 50.

³³ Dhammadinnā 2015, p. 483. She writes: “Gender constructs are, by and large, infrastructural components of hierarchical ideologies in social, institutional, as well as religious history” (2015, p. 483).

³⁴ Dhammadinnā 2015, p. 484.

³⁵ Levering 1997, p. 137.

³⁶ Appleton 2011, p. 35.

³⁷ Appleton 2011, p. 35. Appleton here cites Kabilsingh (1991, p. 31), who argues that this paradigm of female spiritual inferiority has a positive economic component for modern-day Buddhist monasteries in Thailand, as “offerings to the Sangha . . . is the primary way most laypeople hope to gain merit” (2011, p. 49). She then states that such practices may explain the larger number of female practitioners.

because this was not initially a soteriological goal in the Theravada tradition.³⁸ Others, including Sharma, argue that a woman on the bodhisattva path can simply strive to be reborn as a man in the next life.³⁹ Appleton nonetheless suggests that exclusion from buddhahood has had major ramifications for Buddhist women.⁴⁰ She cites Walters, stating:

The early community of Buddhist nuns viewed this exclusion as important enough to warrant the composition of the *Gotamī-apadāna*, which portrays the leader of the nuns' community in a role similar to that of the Buddha. The *Gotamī-apadāna* thus provides one solution to the exclusion of women from Buddhahood: the identification of the most senior Buddhist woman with something akin to that goal, and the confirmation that a woman's awakening is of the same quality as a man's. However, this "separate but equal" solution is incomplete, for Gotamī still relies upon her stepson Gotama Buddha for the Buddhist teachings and the creation of the nuns' order. In addition, the exclusion of women from Buddhahood and the [*bodhisatta*] path to it is inextricably tied up with other ideas about the effects of karma on one's sex. This exclusion must also be viewed alongside the restrictions imposed upon, and the early extinction of, the order of nuns, which left women with no living role models for the pursuit of spiritual goals.⁴¹

From this, we can conclude that narratives on the prohibition of female buddhahood and bodhisattvahood had, and continue to have, the ability to detrimentally affect female audiences and their perceived spiritual agency through soteriological exclusion based on gender.⁴²

Conversely, there is evidence that certain Mahayana sutras have had a positive effect on female audiences. Didactic narratives—including those of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*—may be seen as the source for the higher status of women in Chan Buddhist contexts in the tenth through twelfth centuries CE.⁴³ The *Gaṇḍavyūha* was doctrinally influential in this context, providing prime examples of advanced and "enlightened" female bodhisattvas (many of whom are also goddesses in the text). Levering's study first details the normative, fully-male soteriological hierarchy visually represented in Chan monasteries at this time, and the resulting marginalization of female adherents. Nonetheless, she

³⁸ Kajiyama 1982, p. 64.

³⁹ Sharma 1978, p. 77.

⁴⁰ Appleton 2011, p. 48, n. 41. See also the further studies that Appleton lists here.

⁴¹ Appleton 2011, p. 48. See Walters 1994.

⁴² The study of shifts in gender discrepancies on the path toward buddhahood is also valuable in tracing text-historical developments. See section two below for an introductory analysis of these processes.

⁴³ See Levering 1997.

argues that the “rhetoric” of “praise” bestowed upon the female bodhisattvas in particular sutra narratives “make it possible for twelfth-century Chinese Buddhist listeners to accept” a similar status for a woman at that time.⁴⁴ In other words, from the perspective of the male leaders of their communities, the high status of female advanced bodhisattvas in the Chan hagiographies is “made plausible because enlightened female bodhisattvas are so praised and [highly] evaluated in the sutra’s goddess tradition.”⁴⁵ While groundbreaking for their time period, such moves toward gender equity in certain Mahayana texts clearly impacted their audiences, both female and male. In the section that follows, I trace the rise of gender inequity in Buddhist texts, both mainstream and Mahayana, along with a subsequent shift to greater soteriological equity for female bodhisattvas.

2. *Shifting Female Access to Buddhahood in the Early Middle Period (ca. 0–250 CE)*

While there are a multitude of issues to consider when attempting to trace the text-historical development of gendered soteriology in Buddhist traditions, I will make key observations below in order to establish a broad-based framework from which we can understand both the groundbreaking status of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*’s female bodhisattvas and the shift that I argue that this text instigates. First, the early Buddhist goal of becoming an *arhat* was not gender-specific and thus open to all.⁴⁶ This is one factor that has led Appleton to propose an early period of relative gender equity in the soteriological scope of the Theravada tradition, prior to the time when commentators “explicitly” prohibited women from taking the bodhisattva vow.⁴⁷ One of the most notable examples of this prohibition occurs in the *Nidāna-kathā*, in a commentary on the *Buddhavaṃsa*’s Dīpaṅkara Jātaka.⁴⁸ This narrative is among the most widespread

⁴⁴ Levering 1997, p. 162.

⁴⁵ Levering 1997, p. 165.

⁴⁶ See Appleton 2011.

⁴⁷ Appleton 2011, p. 41.

⁴⁸ There exists a clear prohibition on female bodhisattas in the Pali commentarial tradition. Appleton argues that the “compositional history” of the Theravada *Nidāna-kathā* “is at least partly responsible for the exclusion of women from the *bodhisatta* path” (2011, p. 36). This is due in part, she writes, to the wholesale absence of female incarnations of the Buddha Śākyamuni in his numerous previous bodhisattva incarnations, whether they be animal or human. She contends that this “soteriological irrelevance of gender” inherent in the goal of *arhat* subsequently led women to be excluded from bodhisattvahood once commentators weighed in on the tales of the Buddha’s previous lives in their “codification of a *bodhisatta* path” (2011, p. 50). Based on the evidence I discuss below, including the “five impossibilities” (which Appleton does not comparatively discuss), I do not align with her premise that women’s exclusion from bodhisattvahood “was not, therefore, a carefully considered doctrine designed to exclude women” (2011, p. 47). I do, however, fully agree with her follow-up to this statement: “It did, however, result in a great inequality, despite widespread recognition that women were capable of achieving arhatship” (2011, p. 47). Anālayo (2015), furthermore, puts forward a similar

in Buddhist traditions because it portrays the future buddha Śākyamuni's bodhisattva vow. Here, he is the rich man turned ascetic, Sumedha, who—in throwing himself in the mud to create a clear pathway for the Tathāgata Dīpaṅkara—achieves the resolution (i.e., *bodhicitta* in the Mahayana) to surpass the goal of arahatship and achieve complete and perfect buddhahood for the benefit of all beings. For Mahayanists, and some non-Mahayana Buddhists as discussed above, this is a narrative of utmost importance given that practitioners aim to follow in Sumedha's footsteps.⁴⁹ As he lies prone in the mud waiting for the Buddha's arrival, Sumedha thinks:

Human existence, attainment of the (male) sex, cause, seeing a Teacher, going forth, attainment of the special qualities, an act of merit, and will-power—by combining these eight things the resolve succeeds.⁵⁰

Appleton acknowledges that the *Buddhavaṃsa's* early discussion of the “eight conditions” necessary for the resolve to become a buddha already prohibits practitioners in a female body from attaining the first step toward embarking on the bodhisattva path.⁵¹ Yet she argues that it is the later commentary that does the real damage as it prohibits bodhisattvas from taking female form in future incarnations as well.⁵² I would suggest that the *Buddhavaṃsa* passage itself carries a significant amount of doctrinal weight, however, in prohibiting female bodhisattvahood in the Theravada tradition, particularly when we consider the intertextuality of Princess Muni's narrative discussed below.⁵³

Like Appleton, Anālayo also argues that there was a time of relative soteriological egalitarianism “before the doctrine of women's inability to pursue Buddhahood was well established.”⁵⁴ This statement points to his earlier study of the *Bahudhātuka-sutta*

argument on the potential cause(s) for the overwhelmingly male gender of virtually all of the Buddha's past incarnations in the complex transmission of the Jātaka narratives.

⁴⁹ See Drewes 2019, p. 2, for a listing of scholarship on this ubiquitous Buddhist narrative.

⁵⁰ Horner 1946, p. 15, v. 59.

⁵¹ Appleton 2011, pp. 36–37.

⁵² Appleton 2011, pp. 37–39. Here, Appleton notes that the commentary on the *Buddhavaṃsa*, *Nidāna-kathā* (part of the larger *Jātakatthavaṇṇanā*, a commentary on the “late canonical” Jātaka tales of the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Cariyāpīṭaka*) was solidified by the sixth century, but with material that could be much earlier (2011, p. 36, n. 9).

⁵³ Drewes notes that this list of eight conditions that exclude female practitioners from making a successful bodhisattva vow is “apparently found only in Theravāda texts” (2019, p. 3). As a potential counterargument to what I suggest here, Endo's discussion ([1997] 2002, pp. 252–54) is useful. While he points out that Sumedha seems to innocently take stock of the situation in a story that commentators subsequently ran with, any person hearing the narrative would nonetheless likely recognize that Sumedha's statements clearly exclude the possibility of female bodhisattvas.

⁵⁴ Anālayo 2015, p. 122. In his 2009 study, Anālayo writes: “According to early Buddhist thought, the ability to attain any of the four stages of awakening is independent of gender. An explicit

of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, where we find a listing of “five impossibilities” for women, including the attainment of full and complete buddhahood.⁵⁵ Anālayo agrees with Kajiyama’s assertion that the five impossibilities were likely a later interpolation.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Anālayo believes that the Pali canon did contain the five impossibilities by the first century BCE, and likely earlier.⁵⁷ This is also the approximate date that has been assigned to the *Buddhavaṃsa*, the source of the “eight conditions” in the Sumedha story discussed above.⁵⁸

While not the central soteriological goal of the Theravada tradition, given the effect of prohibitions on buddhahood for Theravada women discussed above, these two passages seem likely to have had a negative impact on female Buddhist practitioners. The assertion that each of these two passages had some doctrinal influence is supported by their citation in four differing recensions of a didactic narrative on the Buddha Śākyamuni’s past life as a woman, the narrative taking place in a time preceding his bodhisattva vow in the presence of Dīpaṅkara Buddha. Each version of the narrative cites one of these two passages—the “five impossibilities” or the “eight conditions”—as its scriptural basis for the prohibition of the female character’s *vyākaraṇa* (prediction to enlightenment from a buddha), a requisite in mainstream texts for solidifying one’s status as a bodhisattva.⁵⁹

endorsement of women’s abilities to reach awakening can be found in a discourse in the *Samyutta-nikāya* and its counterparts in two *Samyukta-āgama* collections translated into Chinese, which allegorically refer to a set of wholesome qualities as a vehicle for approaching liberation. The three versions agree that by means of this vehicle the goal of liberation can be reached independent of whether the one who mounts the vehicle is a woman or a man” (2009, p. 137).

⁵⁵ In the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, these five also include a wheel-turning king, Sakka/Śakra, Brahmā, and Māra (Anālayo 2009, pp. 161–62). Here, Anālayo discusses parallel textual examples and the ways in which this list stems from cultural norms in patriarchal ancient Indian society.

⁵⁶ See Kajiyama 1982. This is due to the absence of five possibilities in a Chinese translation of the “*Madhyama-āgama* parallel to the *Bahudhātuka-sutta* . . . apparently based on a Prākṛit original transmitted within the Sarvāstivāda tradition(s)” (Anālayo 2009, p. 138). Kajiyama states that “it is most likely that the dictum did not exist when the Buddhist Order maintained one and the same tradition, but that it was created after the Order was divided into many schools and was inserted into sūtras of various schools” (1982, p. 58, cited in Anālayo 2009, p. 185, n. 64).

⁵⁷ Anālayo sees Kajiyama’s date of circa the first century BCE for the interpolation to be rather late. He writes: “The suggestion by Kajiyama that ‘the dictum that a woman is incapable of becoming a Buddha arose probably in the first century B.C.’ may be putting things at too late a time” (Anālayo 2009, p. 185, n. 64).

⁵⁸ Vincent Tournier (2017, p. 147) has somewhat challenged the date of the first or second century BCE. See also Drewes 2019, p. 3, n. 6. This story is likely the most widespread in Buddhist art and found in many Mahayana texts as well.

⁵⁹ Drewes states that “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 acquires this designation in the final stage of the path, and Yaśomitra holds that one only acquires

Two among the three versions in which we specifically find a citation of the five impossibilities likely date prior to the middle of the third century CE.⁶⁰ In the version of this Jātaka from the *Ekottarāgama*, Princess Munī speaks with the Buddha of that era, Ratnaśikhi, telling him that she'll "cut off" her life if she does not receive his prediction of her enlightenment. Nonetheless, Ratnaśikhi cites the "five impossibilities" and gives her what Anālayo calls "a prediction of a prediction," namely that she will subsequently receive *vyākaraṇa* from the Tathāgatha Dīpaṅkara (presumably in her future rebirth as Sumedha).⁶¹ Thus, in order to receive the *vyākaraṇa*, or even enter into bodhisattvahood, she must be reborn as male.

The second of these two likely early narrative redactions occurs in the *Liuduji jing* 六度集經 (Scriptural Collection of the Six Perfections).⁶² Here, the female protagonist is able to make her bodhisattva vow, yet only after the Buddha Ratnaśikhi cites the five impossibilities (here there are actually six, as becoming a "*pratyekabuddha*," or solitary buddha, is added to the list) saying: "If it is your wish to attain these, you should relinquish your dirty embodiment and acquire a pure body."⁶³ She then "formulate[s] her aspiration" as she is about to commit suicide by jumping off of a building, stating:

May my filthy body now be for the benefit of hungry and thirsty living beings. I seek to become a male myself and receive a prediction of Buddhahood. Whatever living beings in this troubled world who are blind and have turned their back on what is right, who are inclined towards what is wrong and do not know a Buddha, I shall rescue them.⁶⁴

Ratnaśikhi then proceeds to rescue her from self-mortification and, as she is mid-leap, magically transforms her into a man. She (now he) asks the Buddha for *vyākaraṇa* and, as in the *Ekottarāgama* version, he states that s/he will indeed become

it in the final lifetime in which one attains Buddhahood" (2019, p. 8). He also writes: "Though the idea seems implicit in the *Buddhavamsa* itself, in his perhaps sixth-century *Cariyāpīṭaka* commentary, Dhammapāla states that one does not become a bodhisattva (Pali: *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" (2019, pp. 3–4).

⁶⁰ While these two versions take up the theme of suicide, the *Liuduji jing* 六度集經 (Scriptural Collection on the Six Perfections; T no. 152) version intensifies the theme, nonetheless magically changing the female protagonist into a man. Among the four examples Anālayo gives, according to his analysis, neither of these explicitly mention the name of either Sumedha or Śākyamuni, while the other two redactions do. For evidence on the dating of the *Liuduji jing* to the first half of third century CE, see Zachetti 2010, pp. 144, 167–68.

⁶¹ Anālayo 2015, p. 120.

⁶² T no. 152. See Anālayo 2015, p. 105.

⁶³ Anālayo 2015, pp. 118–19.

⁶⁴ Anālayo 2015, p. 119.

a buddha but must wait to receive a buddha name—a necessary component of a complete *vyākaraṇa*—from the then future Buddha Dīpaṅkara. Thus, by citing the “impossibilities” doctrine, both of these didactic narratives inform their Buddhist audiences that females cannot receive a prediction to future buddhahood.⁶⁵ The extant Chinese translations therefore provide evidence of the impact and importance of this doctrinal tenet during the early part of the middle period (0–250 CE).⁶⁶

Turning to Mahayana contexts, we find lower-level female bodhisattvas to be widely permitted even in the earliest known Mahayana sutras. That said, the majority of such sources prohibit advanced female bodhisattvas. In early Mahayana contexts, prior to the *dharmadhātu* doctrine put forward by the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, advanced bodhisattvas are generally defined as those who reside in a buddha field (*buddha-kṣetra*; e.g., that of Amitābha or Akṣobhya), seeking to eventually purify their own buddha field. In comparison with the two didactic narratives discussed above, the narrative of the female bodhisattva Gaṅgādevī in the nineteenth chapter of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* contains a somewhat similar narrative within a Mahayana doctrinal milieu.⁶⁷ The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* may likely be the earliest extant Mahayana text to take up the issue of gender through its prohibition of advanced female bodhisattvas. This sutra also references the Sumedha Jātaka narrative, as Gaṅgādevī is reported to have been in the company of Śākyamuni at the time when he received his *vyākaraṇa* from Dīpaṅkara.⁶⁸ Alternate versions of Sumedha’s narrative mention the presence of a young woman named Sumitta, who texts typi-

⁶⁵ It could be argued that the delay of the prediction in the second story, when the female to male transformation has already occurred, is due to the fact that this is Śākyamuni in a previous lifetime and, as per the tale likely well-known by this time, his future buddhahood is to be predicted by the Buddha Dīpaṅkara.

⁶⁶ In the second version discussed above, a female practitioner undertakes a bodhisattva vow prior to a Buddha’s transformation of her sex, and given that the text mentions six perfections in its title, which is the number of perfections associated with early Mahayana sutras such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* (hereafter “AsP” in the notes; cf. the ten perfections found in Nikāya texts). Given these points, it seems at first glance that this narrative has some correlation with the early Mahayana. Yet because it does not discuss any identifiably Mahayana doctrine, this may be a liminal phase of development, or, as the text indicates, a certain lineage associated with the little-known *pratyekabuddha* vehicle. See Paul (1985) 2000, p. 228.

⁶⁷ Among the three narratives discussed thus far, there does not appear to be any certainty as to which text and/or narrative was composed first. That said, the AsP is typically dated to roughly the turn of the first century CE, but with surviving fragments from the Split Collection that have been radiocarbon dated to the second century CE. See Allon and Salomon 2010.

⁶⁸ The “flashback” narrative in this passage presumably occurs during the Buddha’s lifetime as Sumedha, who is mentioned by name in the passage. It is also worth noting here that only the Pali version of the story (e.g., in the *Buddhavamsā*) incorporates the “eight conditions” discussed above (Drewes 2019, p. 3).

cally describe as a previous incarnation of Śākyamuni's wife Yaśodharā.⁶⁹ Yet here, Gaṅgādevī is not presented as Śākyamuni's former wife but rather as a female "robed" disciple in his assembly referred to as *bhaginī*, "sister."⁷⁰

The narrative of Gaṅgādevā, or "Gaṅgādevī" as she is named in the chapter's colophons, demonstrates the process of entering and advancing along the bodhisattva path in early Mahayana thought. Here, Ānanda inquires of Lord Buddha (Śākyamuni): "Blessed One, in the presence of which *tathāgata* did this sister, Gaṅgādevī, plant the meritorious roots which are (equal to) the arising of the first thought of unsurpassed, perfect enlightenment?"⁷¹ The Blessed One answers that it was in the presence of the Tathāgata Dīpaṅkara, again during his own lifetime as Sumedha, that she not only "planted" but also "ripened" (*pariṇāmita*) these meritorious roots of full and complete buddhahood. Śākyamuni then describes how this occurred. First, the sister "showered (*āvakīrṇa*) the Tathāgata Dīpaṅkara with golden flowers, while desiring unsurpassed, supreme Enlightenment."⁷² Then, Śākyamuni states:

I strewed the five lotus flowers over Dipankara, the Tathagata, and I acquired the patient acceptance of dharmas which fail to be produced, and then Dipankara predicted my future enlightenment with the words: "You, young man, will in a future period become a Tathagata, Shakyamuni by name." Thereupon, when she had heard my prediction, [that sister] produced a thought to the effect that: "Oh, certainly, like that young man I also would like to be predicted to full enlightenment!"⁷³

This narrative echoes the story in the *Ekottarāgama* of Princess Munī mentioned above, whose aspiration for buddhahood arose after she heard of the monk's prediction to future buddhahood as Dīpaṅkara. And, like Munī, Gaṅgādevī also does not receive

⁶⁹ See Drewes 2019, p. 16, n. 33 for a list of Mahayana texts in which we encounter the Dīpaṅkara Jātaka narrative.

⁷⁰ *Bhaginī* is a term also used to refer to a group of bodhisattva-goddesses in the *Vimalakīrtinīrdeśa Sutra* (Paul [1979] 1985, p. 226). Gaṅgādevā/Gaṅgādevī has been referred to as a goddess in translations by Conze (1973) and Paul ([1979] 1985), yet the passage itself never describes her as a goddess (*devī*) but rather a woman or female (*strī*). Nor does she exhibit superhuman powers in the narrative, other than those she vows to demonstrate once she attains buddhahood. She is referred to in the passage as "Gaṅgādevā"; the term *devī* appears only in the chapter colophons. I do not rule out the possibility that the text envisions her as a goddess, but there is no apparent evidence attesting to this (AsP, pp. 174 and 179–83; Conze 1973, pp. 219–21).

⁷¹ AsP, pp. 181–82. For further discussion on this topic, see Drewes (2019) who gives multiple relevant examples from the text.

⁷² AsP, p. 182.

⁷³ Conze 1973, p. 220. Conze's translation.

a *vyākaraṇa* at the same time as the story's male practitioner.⁷⁴ That said, there is a marked difference in the spiritual attainments of Śākyamuni (as Sumedha) and the "sister." In other words, unlike the story of Princess Munī, this narrative gives a basis other than biological sex for Gaṅgādevī's delayed *vyākaraṇa*.

As we see in the passage above, Śākyamuni realizes the "patient acceptance" (*kṣānti*) of the non-arising of *dharmas*, a major tenet in the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Further, as Śākyamuni "strews" the lotus flowers over the Buddha Dīpaṃkara, he has the powerful realization that he describes elsewhere in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* as "the fullness of this perfection of wisdom."⁷⁵ Gaṅgādevī, on the other hand, has just attained the first thought of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) and, through her aspiration for *vyākaraṇa* and offering of flowers to Dīpaṃkara, has ripened her meritorious roots (*kuśalamūla*). Thus, we can conclude that—at that point—she is a bodhisattva, albeit one who is at an early stage of the path. Only now, during her audience with the Buddha Śākyamuni in this current lifetime, does Gaṅgādevī vow that she "will not be afraid" or falter in aspiring to purify her own buddha field.⁷⁶ As a result, the Buddha's retelling of their prior meeting is brought to fruition, and she receives his *vyākaraṇa* that she will become the Tathāgata Golden Flower. In order to fulfill this prediction, Śākyamuni then tells her that she will first be reborn as male in Akṣobhya's buddha field, Abhirati. Achieving advanced bodhisattvahood in this early Mahayana text therefore requires a male body and mind.

As Drewes writes, "Mahāyāna texts apparently unanimously depict the path beginning with the first arising of the thought of becoming a Buddha (*prathamacittotpāda*) . . . typically aeons before one first receives a Buddha's *vyākaraṇa*, and apply the term bodhisattva from this point."⁷⁷ If this is correct, then in the earliest strata of Mahayana belief, one cannot technically be called a "bodhisattva" until *vyākaraṇa* has been received, as in the case of Sumedha, which is not so very different from the mainstream contexts discussed above. Here, we see Gaṅgādevī's first aspiration for buddhahood when she encounters the Tathāgata Dīpaṃkara alongside Sumedha who has just received his *vyākaraṇa*. As per Drewes, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* "divides the [bodhisattva] path into three stages, corresponding to bodhisattvas who are 'first set out in the vehicle' (*prathamayānasamprasthita*), 'irreversible' (*avinivartanīya*), and 'bound by one more birth' (*ekajātīpratibaddha*), i.e., destined to attain Buddhahood

⁷⁴ Although Gaṅgā's narrative here is not as strictly tied to the prediction of Śākyamuni in the Sumedha Jātaka narrative, it reconceives the tale with the added element of a female practitioner called "sister."

⁷⁵ Conze 1973, p. 102.

⁷⁶ Conze 1973, p. 219. Q.v. n. 79 below.

⁷⁷ Drewes 2019, p. 16. See also p. 16, n. 34.

in their very next lives.”⁷⁸ Here, it is Gaṅgādevī's attainment of irreversibility⁷⁹ and *vyākaraṇa* that, in turn, destine her for the third stage of bodhisattvahood, being “bound by one more birth.” Although the text gives us a clear doctrinal basis for the reason that Gaṅgādevī's *vyākaraṇa* happens “aeons” later than Śākyamuni's, unlike the didactic mainstream narratives discussed above, no reason is given for the necessity of her future change of sex. In further alignment with those previous narratives, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* de facto prohibits female buddhahood by prohibiting females from attaining advanced bodhisattvahood (e.g., purifying one's own future buddha field), and even from receiving the title of “bodhisattva,” without first changing sex. Unlike mainstream texts, however, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* does not appear to prohibit women from embarking on a clearly-delineated bodhisattva path.

While the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* prohibits advanced female bodhisattvas without explicitly stating its grounds, one rationale given for the prohibition of advanced female bodhisattvas in Mahayana texts of this period is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the “five impossibilities.” In chapter 12 of the *Lotus Sutra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*),⁸⁰ an account of an eight-year-old Nāga princess proclaims her bodhisattva vow at the feet of the Buddha Śākyamuni, saying: “Because I wish [for] enlightenment, I will extensively teach the Dharma which liberates from suffering.”⁸¹ Hearing this, Śāriputra cites the impossibilities—which in this case includes a sixth, namely, that a female cannot become “an irreversible bodhisattva.”⁸² The Nāga princess then gives an offering of a jewel to the Buddha and undergoes a magical change of sex. The text then states: “She appeared as a bodhisattva.”⁸³ Unlike the story of

⁷⁸ Drewes 2019, p. 16.

⁷⁹ In the Buddha Śākyamuni's presence, Gaṅgādevī asserts: “I, O Lord . . . will not be afraid, and, without fear I shall demonstrate dharma to all beings” (Conze 1973, p. 219). Through this pronouncement, in response to what the Buddha has just taught to the assembly in which she is present, she thus vows to purify her own buddha field. The importance of overcoming fear on the bodhisattva path is a recurring theme of the text. In a passage from the AsP surviving in the Split Collection, Subhūti states:

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, the *bodhisattva-mahāsattva* is to be known as not lacking in Prajñāpāramitā, as standing on the irreversible bodhisattva level (Drewes 2019, p. 20).

Gaṅgādevī's vow before the Buddha thus demonstrates her fearlessness and, like Śākyamuni in the time of Dīpaṅkara, she too has now realized the perfection of wisdom and achieved bodhisattva irreversibility (*avinivartanīya*).

⁸⁰ A provisional date for the text is typically the mid-second century CE, prior to the Chinese translation of Dharmarakṣa (233–310) in 286 CE, although much in the current Sanskrit edition is missing. For recent scholarly discussion on the lateness of some *Lotus Sutra* material, see Harrison 2018, p. 13, and Teiser and Stone 2009, p. 8, n. 4.

⁸¹ Paul (1979) 1985, pp. 188–89.

⁸² Paul (1979) 1985, p. 189.

⁸³ Paul (1979) 1985, p. 189.

Gaṅgādevī in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*, buddha fields are not mentioned in this instance; we see only that this highly-accomplished female practitioner must change her sex in order to become “irreversible” and be deemed a “bodhisattva” by the text’s author(s).⁸⁴ We could therefore argue that Gaṅgādevī advances further on the path in female form than the Nāga princess, as she is still a woman when she receives her *vyākaraṇa* and can therefore be technically termed a “bodhisattva” even as a female. This is not to say that the text actually affords her the title, however.

At some point in the early part of the middle period of Indian Buddhism, in at least one major stream of Mahayana thought, there is a clear shift toward a view which questions the validity of gender constructs in the face of the inherent emptiness of all phenomena (*dharmas*).⁸⁵ Such narratives of “questioning” include the well-known goddess narrative in chapter 6 of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sutra* that overtly challenges proscriptions on advanced female bodhisattvas found in other Mahayana sutras of its time (ca. second century CE).⁸⁶ The goddess who has resided for twelve years in the house of the lay bodhisattva Vimalakīrti is involved in what Paul and Ohnuma describe as a “playful” discussion with Śāriputra.⁸⁷ After the goddess discusses the miraculous events that have occurred in that house, including the appearance within of “all the magnificent . . . Buddha lands,” Śāriputra asks her bluntly: “Why don’t you change your female sex?”⁸⁸ The goddess responds instead by momentarily changing him into the likeness of herself and herself into the likeness of him, to fully illustrate her teaching on the irrelevance of gender when one truly understands emptiness.⁸⁹ The narrative ends with an overview of the goddess’s bodhisattva attainments, as told by Vimalakīrti to Śāriputra: “This goddess has already paid reverence to ninety-two million Buddhas. She easily handles the powers of the Bodhisattva, has completely

⁸⁴ For further discussion of this episode and prior scholarship on it, see Ohnuma 2000, pp. 126–32.

⁸⁵ The Mahayana doctrine of emptiness and the ontology of bodhisattvas who have passed beyond gender has been discussed by Gross (e.g., 1997, p. 412) and Levering (1997, p. 168, n. 17).

⁸⁶ Buswell and Lopez write that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sutra* “probably dates from around the second century CE” (2013, p. 931). Levering notes, citing Kenneth Ch’en’s *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (1973, p. 253), that the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* “was immensely popular with educated people in China from roughly the fourth century on and remains popular today” (1997, p. 151). She further notes that, during the Song 宋 period (960–1279), when the hagiographies of enlightened Chan women are believed to have been composed, “the story of the goddess and Śāriputra is one that all from the aristocracy or gentry-scholar classes in China who were active in Buddhist, artistic, and literary circles would have known well” (1997, p. 151).

⁸⁷ Paul (1979) 1985, pp. 221–23 and Ohnuma 2000, pp. 127–28.

⁸⁸ Paul (1979) 1985, pp. 229–30.

⁸⁹ For a thorough discussion of prior scholarship on Mahayana “transformation of sex” narratives, see Ohnuma 2000; for translations of many of these narratives see Paul (1979) 1985. In other narratives, the female protagonists question the doctrinal validity of gender proscriptions but change their sex despite this (see Paul [1979] 1985 and Ohnuma 2000).

professed the vows (of the Bodhisattva), has attained the patience to accept the non-arising (of phenomena), and will not revert (from the Bodhisattva path).⁹⁰ In stark contrast to the other five narratives discussed here—three of which mention the “five (or six) impossibilities,” and four of which likely date to a period prior to circa 250 CE—the bodhisattva-goddess of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, like Gaṅgādevī of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, attains the state of irreversibility in female form. Yet, unlike Gaṅgādevī, along with all those previously mentioned, this goddess is not required to change her sex in order to progress further on the path.⁹¹ This emboldened position of the goddess in chapter 6 of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* may in turn have paved the way for the relative gender equity among the fifty-three *kalyāṇa-mitras* of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*, among whom twenty-one are female bodhisattvas with advanced attainments.⁹²

I emphasize this first half of the middle-period phase because—with the exception of our potential *Lotus Sutra* anomaly in dating—it allows us some sense of when texts depicting varying Buddhist viewpoints toward the aptness of female bodhisattvahood and, in the Mahayana, advanced female bodhisattvahood, were circulating in the Buddhist world. I have suggested here that attaining irreversibility, and/or receiving *vyākaraṇa*, equates with the status of advanced bodhisattvahood in early Mahayana practice. This circa 0–250 CE period is also a time when, in order to become an advanced bodhisattva, the necessity of the change of sex for females—whether human, *nāginī*, or *devī*—seems to have been taken for granted. As Dhammadinnā writes, the didactic narratives either “implicitly or explicitly orient themselves around the fundamental dogma that irreversible investiture as a bodhisattva—the stepping-stone to becoming a Buddha—necessitates a male gender and leaves womanhood behind for good.”⁹³ That such a “dogma” was “foundational” to the early middle-period “schools,” as Dhammadinnā suggests, indeed seems to be the case when we consider that multiple textual examples either align with, contest, or—as we shall see in the *Gaṇḍavyūha*—effectively ignore this model.⁹⁴ Even the omission of the term “bodhisattva” for forty-eight of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s fifty-three *kalyāṇa-mitras*, most or likely all of whom have attained the state of irreversibility, seems to implicitly orient itself in relation to earlier prohibitive teachings.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Paul (1979) 1985, pp. 231–32.

⁹¹ Levering also makes this point regarding the goddess's irreversibility; see her discussion of this *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* narrative (1997, pp. 149–52).

⁹² The fact that the individual who does not change her sex in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is a goddess (*devī*), rather than a human or *nāginī*, is certainly a point to consider further in future scholarship.

⁹³ Dhammadinnā 2015, p. 485.

⁹⁴ Dhammadinnā 2015, p. 485.

⁹⁵ So too, in the discursive exchange between Śāriputra and the goddess who resides in the house of Vimalakīrti above; the text's author(s) assign her great bodhisattva powers, but carefully avoid naming her as “bodhisattva” or stating outright that she is enlightened (see Paul [1979] 1985, pp. 231–32).

3. *Entering the Dharma Realm: The Innovative Bodhisattva Ontology of the Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*

As I have shown above, a particular stream of Mahayana thought exemplified by the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, among others, did not allow female-gendered beings to become advanced bodhisattvas, and thus buddhas, without their being first reborn as male. By contrast, the *Gaṇḍavyūha*—moving forward in the same rhetorical vein as chapter 6 of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* (yet without stating as much)—appears highly innovative in its egalitarianism. The full text, dating to no later than circa 420 CE, comprises a narrative sequence that details the young pilgrim Sudhana’s encounters with fifty-three consecutive *kalyāṇa-mitras* who serve as bodhisattva preceptors.⁹⁶ In either recension, there is no major distinction or preference given to one virtuous friend over another based on gender, with the exception of the omission of the title “bodhisattva” for all but the five among them who were well-known bodhisattvas. Thus, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* presents female and male teachers on equal footing.

After encountering the great bodhisattva Mañjuśrī as the first *kalyāṇa-mitra*, Sudhana embarks on his journey throughout the human realm (Jambudvīpa) to receive these multifarious teachings in his quest to excel on the bodhisattva path. The virtuous friends include everyone from the future buddha Maitreya to an accomplished householder, a perfumer, the Buddha’s wife (Gopā), and the Buddha’s mother, Queen Māyā. The text’s author(s) intersperse the powerful narratives of a superhuman nun (Siṃhavijṛmbhitā), a great “bodhisattva” (Avalokiteśvara), an alleged courtesan (Vasumitrā), one god (Mahādeva), and a host of goddesses. That said, in order to fully grasp the complexity embedded within individual narratives, and how these work together, we first must develop a sense of the text’s overarching bodhisattva ontology.

The *Gaṇḍavyūha* conceives of the *dharmadhātu*, as a conceptual plane of non-duality wherein all phenomena (*dharmas*) are realized as both empty and united, as ontologically the same. As we saw in chapter 6 of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, as per Ohnuma:

[The goddess] is obviously already a highly advanced bodhisattva. . . . She has attained *anutpattikadharmakṣānti* . . . and [thus] understands the non-arising and emptiness of all dharmas; in fact, it is only because she understands the emptiness of phenomena that she is able to gain control over them and thus playfully change her sex in order to startle and enlighten a benighted male.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Q.v. n. 7 and n. 27 above. An earlier Chinese translation of the text ends after the narrative of the thirty-fourth virtuous friend (the night goddess Pramuditāyanajagadvirocānā discussed below). Therefore, we can tentatively date only this “core” portion of the text to circa the mid-third century CE.

⁹⁷ Ohnuma 2000, p. 127.

In other words, from the doctrinal innovations of the *Lotus Sutra*, advanced bodhisattvas are known to magically produce (*vikurvati*) myriad emanations for the benefit of those to be taught (*vaineya*), who are thus brought to maturity on the bodhisattva path. The *Avataṃsaka Sutra*, translated by Buddhahadra (358–429) around 418 to 421, includes both the circa third-century *Daśabhūmika* and *Gaṅḍavyūha* sutras. Both texts provide further doctrinal innovations and systemizations of the stages (*bhūmis*) of bodhisattva attainments and the process of magical emanations. The *Avataṃsaka*'s introduction of *dharmadhātu* theology manifests the Mahayana doctrines of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and the non-arising of phenomena (*dharma*s) within a conceptual space: the interpenetrative enlightened mind. Williams writes:

The *dharmadhātu* is the universe seen correctly, the quicksilver universe of the visionary perspective wherein all is empty (or all is the play of omniscient awareness)⁹⁸ and therefore is seen as a flow lacking hard edges. This is described by the [*Avataṃsaka*] sūtra as a universe of radiance and, in a wonderful image, it is said to be a world of pure luminosity with no shadows. Such is experienced by the meditator. . . . This universe *is* the Buddha [i.e., the *dharmakāya* of Vairocana]. . . . Moreover, in this state where all is perceived correctly, all is seen as a mental creation. One's mind can therefore penetrate all things, and the Buddha is this all-penetrating, all-transforming awareness.⁹⁹

The Dharma realm is thus the unified enlightened mind that is equal to the Buddha Vairocana. Through its realization, the typical hindrances of worldly phenomena bend to the authoritative power (*adhiṣṭhāna*) of enlightened beings' awareness. A buddha's or bodhisattva's *adhiṣṭhāna*, in this context, in turn fuels myriad rigorous techniques which bodhisattvas have trained in for eons. Each bodhisattva's countless, simultaneous, and interconnecting emanations therefore conquer the very limitations of time and space.

As true reality, then, the Dharma realm—a mental state of equanimity—is also essentially the egoless, interpenetrative, mental dwelling place of advanced and enlightened bodhisattvas.¹⁰⁰ Passages in the *Gaṅḍavyūha*'s narrative of the bodhisattva Maitreya (*kalyāṇa-mitra* no. 53) illustrate this concept.¹⁰¹ Here, in an encomium of

⁹⁸ Omniscience (*sarvajñatā*) is thus equated with enlightenment throughout the Gv, as Osto (2008) has noted. The term appears 348 times in the text.

⁹⁹ Williams (1989) 2009, p. 135.

¹⁰⁰ D. T. Suzuki writes that as the bodhisattva's awareness increases, "the solid outlines of individuality melt away and the feeling of finiteness no more oppresses (him)" (1968, pp. 149–50; cited in Williams [1989] 2009, p. 135).

¹⁰¹ Here I am using the numbering of the *kalyāṇa-mitras* provided in Gv, pp. v–vi. Hereafter, the construction "*kalyāṇa-mitra* no." will appear as "k-m no." for brevity's sake. Furthermore, note that *kalyāṇa-mitras* nos. 1 and 2, Samantabhadra and Mañjuśrī respectively, appear at both the beginning and end of the text's garland of narratives.

Maitreya, Sudhana describes bodhisattvas who have entered the *dharmadhātu* as follows:

[They are] those who dwell in the state of great equanimity (*mahōpekṣā*), yet do not abandon the realm of beings; those who dwell in the state of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), yet are not devoted to that doctrine; those who abide in signlessness (*ānimitta*), yet participate in the ways of beings who operate in physical appearances (*nimitta-carita*); . . . those who control all defilements (*kleśā*) and actions (*karma*), yet appear to be controlled by defilements and actions for the sake of bringing beings to maturity; those who possess thorough knowledge of rebirth's falling way, yet appear to be born and fall away into death; those who have relinquished every path of existence, yet go forth onto every path for the sake of training all beings.¹⁰²

Enlightened beings exist in constant *samādhi* (meditative concentration), as a Dharma body that is coextensive with the Dharma realm.¹⁰³ While perpetually within the *samādhi* state, advanced bodhisattvas produce emanations in manifold world realms (*lokadhātus*). More specifically, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* tells us that the emanated forms of the virtuous friends, as well as the visions they produce (*vyūha*), are visible only to bodhisattva practitioners who have planted meritorious roots and have purified their “mental dispositions.”¹⁰⁴ At 74.23 in the text, in fact, we see that only bodhisattvas of the sixth *bhūmi* and above have achieved this state of mental purity (*śuddhādhyāśaya*), thus gaining entrance into (i.e., an initial realization of) the Dharma realm. They do this through the attainment of “the diamond-hard knowledge which pierces the own-nature of all *dharmas*,” namely, insight into all *dharmas*' lack of an essential and independent nature.¹⁰⁵ Thus, only those bodhisattvas on the cusp of irreversibility, like Sudhana, have the ability to see the miraculously manifested arrays and forms of the virtuous friends.¹⁰⁶ Non-practitioners do not see such *vyūhas*, which display the attainments of advanced and enlightened beings who make up the *dharmadhātu*/*dharmakāya*, and

¹⁰² Gv 371.12–17.

¹⁰³ For elaboration on this point see Gómez (1977). Furthermore, Osto rightly defines *samādhi* as “a mystical state of [meditative] consciousness that transforms mundane reality into a supra-mundane state” (2008, p. 53).

¹⁰⁴ Osto 2008, pp. 83–84.

¹⁰⁵ This verse is part of a list of characteristics associated with bodhisattvas of each stage: *śuddhādhyāśayānām bodhisattvānām sarvadharmasvabhāvabhedañjānavajram* (Gv 74.23–24).

¹⁰⁶ While Osto does not delve into the nature of the specific bodhisattva stages (*bhūmis*) in the text, he takes bodhisattvas of this level to be “advanced” (2008, p. 83). While this is indeed possible, it appears that we can only clearly designate the transition to advanced bodhisattvahood, in the Gv, upon entrance into the stage of irreversibility, the seventh *bhūmi*. See further discussion in section 4 below.

represent its superlative power, purity, and interpenetrative nature. Sudhana's advisors—each through their own *bodhisattva vimokṣas*—thus introduce him to manifold, extraordinary visions that reflect the ultimate reality of the Dharma realm that he is to realize.¹⁰⁷ It is through these *vyūhas* that they impart their soteriological knowledge and thereby progressively train him in ascending the advanced stages of bodhisattvahood. In the following section, I will detail the ways in which *dharmadhātu* doctrine supports the enlightened status of female bodhisattvas in my analysis of the soteriological levels, or *bhūmis*, of select goddesses in the text.

4. *The Soteriological Status of Bodhisattva-Goddesses in the Gaṅḍavyūha Sutra*

Among the *kalyāṇa-mitras* Sudhana encounters along his path, the text describes eleven as goddesses and includes eight consecutive narratives on the attainments and teachings of highly-advanced night goddesses. In the text's unusually egalitarian attitude toward these female bodhisattvas, we find no discussion of the impurity of the female form or the limited capabilities of practitioners on the basis of gender.¹⁰⁸ In its ontology of equanimity, then, *dharmadhātu* doctrine may be seen to facilitate the very existence of advanced and enlightened female bodhisattvas, without necessitating a prior change of sex.¹⁰⁹

The soteriological status of the *Gaṅḍavyūha's* bodhisattva-goddesses cannot be productively analyzed by solely comparing individual narrative selections, however. The further one digs and probes into the text's layers, the more the twists and surprises unfold in its bodhisattva doctrine and narrative trajectory. Moreover, scholars are at odds with regard to the doctrinal value of the text due to, as Gómez writes, "its lack of concern for the clarification of philosophical issues."¹¹⁰ It is indeed the case that the text's artfully written narratives and verse sections typically descend into stunning prolixity and repetition as each passage proceeds. One could thus argue that such a rambling style in a lengthy text filled with celestial visions would defy meaningful doctrinal systematization. This is the view, in fact, that Gómez himself takes. That said, the *Gaṅḍavyūha* is the final book of the *Avataṃsaka Sutra*, the foundational doctrinal

¹⁰⁷ Osto (2009b, p. 284) notes that "the word *vyūha* is an extremely common term in the Gv, and often occurs in descriptions of mystical visions and in the names of the liberations [*vimokṣas*] attained by the good friends (*kalyāṇa-mitra*)."

¹⁰⁸ Osto notes that female practitioners "appear to play a more significant and positive role in this *sūtra* than any other Mahāyāna text" (2008, p. 88). Moreover, while beyond the scope of the present study, further inquiry is warranted into the relative value of the representation of the purified body of a goddess as an advanced and/or enlightened bodhisattva versus that of a human woman.

¹⁰⁹ This factor has been discussed by Gross (1997) and Levering (1997). Levering writes, "[To] the degree to which [buddhas and bodhisattvas] are identified with *dharmakāya* or *dharmadhātu* . . . all are empty of any essentialistic, deterministic gender" (1997, pp. 168–69, n. 17).

¹¹⁰ Gómez 1977, p. 227.

text of the highly-influential Huayan 華嚴 sect of Buddhism (beginning in China in the sixth century CE). In contrast to Gómez, furthermore, George Tanabe Jr. characterizes the *Avataṃsaka Sutra* as a whole as follows:

[It] is not a report of undigested visions, but a sophisticated work that blends fantastic visions with interpretive discussions about them. This complex weaving of doctrine and fantasy, a characteristic of sutras, results in a visionary statement that comes with the beginnings of its own code for interpretation.¹¹¹

Thus, it seems we have a divergence of opinions. Nonetheless, as both scholars make clear—the text does not reveal its doctrinal knowledge easily. In order to venture into the study of the systemization of bodhisattva attainments and enlightenment in the text, we must come prepared not only with methods to decipher its nascent code, but also a map.

Fortunately, Gómez's prior study—analyzing the bodhisattva's progressive attainments of wonder-working capabilities in the text through the *Gaṇḍavyūha's* ten bodhisattva birth stages (*janmabhūmis*)—gives us such a guide, providing “a rough idea of the [bodhisattva's] relative position in the path.”¹¹² These are fittingly presented by none other than the goddess of the Lumbinī grove where the bodhisattva Gautama, and future buddha Śākyamuni, was born on earth for the last time. Gómez, somewhat reluctantly, bases his analysis of the *Gaṇḍavyūha's* system of bodhisattva *bhūmis* on these bodhisattva birth stages, which—as I will show—are actually quite precise.¹¹³ Yet, how can we justify the method of using a single passage to analyze the full breadth of what some have charged to be a fanciful, magniloquent text?

To begin with, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* has a specific rhetorical framework comprised of “orderly patterned visionary experiences.”¹¹⁴ These are delineated as a series of distinct narratives, with one virtuous friend pointing Sudhana toward the next for the progressive continuance of his bodhisattva instruction. Moreover, the concept of bodhisattva *bhūmis* in the text is not relegated to the section on *janmabhūmis* alone.¹¹⁵ It is bolstered by reinforcements elsewhere in the text that point to an emergent, standardized mode of thought, particularly when compared to the likely somewhat-later *Daśabhūmika Sutra*.¹¹⁶ For example, at 74.3–14, the text provides us with abbrevi-

¹¹¹ Tanabe 1992, p. 11, cited in Williams (1989) 2009, p. 134.

¹¹² Gómez 1977, p. 246.

¹¹³ The *janmabhūmis* are discussed by the night goddess Sutejomaṇḍalaratīśrī (k-m no. 40) at Gv 285.21–290.16.

¹¹⁴ Osto 2009b, p. 284. See also Ehman cited therein (1977, p. 105).

¹¹⁵ Gv 285.21–290.16.

¹¹⁶ Q.v. n. 7. The *Daśabhūmika* may be said to be a continuation of the same mode of thought, wherein we see *bhūmi* soteriology systematically explicated, as is the purpose of the text.

ated lists of bodhisattva attainments relegated to particular “stages of knowledge” (*jñānabhūmis*) of bodhisattvas, which correspond with the section on *janmabhūmis* from the seventh stage of irreversibility and above. While there are some variants in the discussion of the lower levels of the *janmabhūmis* in comparison to the *jñānabhūmis*, the characteristics of what I am terming the “advanced” stages in this text (i.e., the seventh through tenth *bhūmis* and *janmabhūmis*) do indeed align. Moreover, the passage on the nun Siṃhavijṛmbhitā (k-m no. 17), at 151.9–25, presents her preaching to the multitudes in varying world realms, and simultaneously teaching *samādhis* appropriate for each of the “*bhūmis*” of bodhisattvas.¹¹⁷

While Gómez states that the *Gaṇḍavyūha* contains but a “few attempts at suggesting some order in the development of the bodhisattva’s career,”¹¹⁸ I would suggest instead that the text’s very structure *is* the development of a bodhisattva’s career. As each of the virtuous friends point Sudhana onward to the next teacher, the development of his bodhisattva education is subdivided to such an extent that the progressive narratives do not directly parallel the *bhūmi* system.¹¹⁹ Here we may be reminded of the “code” to which Tanabe alludes, in the work of unpacking Sudhana’s incremental ascent through each of the bodhisattva’s individual *vimokṣas*, in order to determine how particular narratives provide some allusion to the bodhisattva *bhūmis*. Such is the challenge at hand in the present study. As noted by Osto, the stages of attainment do appear to be hierarchically arranged to at least some extent, with the later virtuous friends—the goddesses being the thirty-first through the fortieth *kalyāṇa-mitras* (along with the forty-third)—providing teachings that intimate the attainments of highly-advanced bodhisattvas.

In identifying where in the *bhūmi* spectrum the status of an “enlightened” bodhisattva can begin to be assigned in the text—that is, in comparison with the evidence provided by specified narratives—an analysis of the passage on the *Gaṇḍavyūha*’s *janmabhūmis* discussed above proves most useful as the most detailed description of the bodhisattva’s soteriological stages in the text. After determining the precise stages of select bodhisattva-goddesses of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* through a comparison with its bodhisattva *janmabhūmis*, below, I will then consider the broader ramifications of the unusual instances of gender equity in this text.¹²⁰

To begin to decipher the sutra’s encoded terminology with regard to enlightenment, we must first approximate how the text conceives of this process as occurring

¹¹⁷ For a full list of the *kalyāṇa-mitra* narratives, see Osto 2008, appendix A.

¹¹⁸ Gómez 1977, p. 246.

¹¹⁹ For further insight into suggested meanings of the divisions of the text, see the Gv commentary by Li Tongxuan (1989).

¹²⁰ I take the *janmabhūmis* (birth stages) as synonymous with bodhisattva *bhūmis* (stages) in the Gv, and further investigation across texts may perhaps reveal “*bhūmi*” as being a form of shorthand for the former term.

in multiple stages. In my analysis of the *janmabhūmis* of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*, I therefore propose distinguishing the term *abhisambodhi*, which Edgerton translates as “perfect enlightenment,”¹²¹ from the oft-used *samyaksambodhi* (“complete and perfect enlightenment”) in this context.¹²² Here, I suggest that the latter term would not likely be necessary to designate one who is “completely awakened,” so to speak, were there not also progressive levels of awakening leading up to this. For example, the *Daśabhūmika Sutra*, which is included in the *Avataṃsaka Sutra* along with the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, designates enlightenment in the *pratyekabuddha* vehicle as “*abhisambodhana*.”¹²³ This suggests that the term is not taken by the *Daśabhūmika*’s authors as a synonym of *samyaksambodhi*. Early Mahayana sutras do not appear to assign *pratyekabuddhas* (of the second vehicle) and *tathāgatas* (of the third vehicle) enlightenment on equal terms. Neither is this likely the case for enlightened bodhisattvas in the *Gaṇḍavyūha* as compared to complete and perfect buddhas in the text. It is true, however, that the interpenetrative character of the *dharmadhātu* ultimately does not seem to distinguish one enlightened being from another in its view of true reality. For example, the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, who is “the model, the path, and the goal” of the sutra, has achieved the point at which enlightened beings are elevated to “such rarified levels” that “distinctions tend to get blurred” between bodhisattvas and buddhas.¹²⁴ That said, Samantabhadra is therefore a bodhisattva at a higher level of awakening than other *kalyāṇa-mitras* in the text with the exception, as we shall see, of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, the text’s key protagonist and interlocutor.

Within the bodhisattva stages (*bhūmis*) of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, we know that entry into the Dharma realm and the acquisition of a body “born of the very *dharmadhātu*” occur gradually. Through this process, the bodhisattva attains ever-higher levels of knowledge (*jñāna*).¹²⁵ These stages represent the ascending levels of one’s ability to see and cognize true reality. The bodhisattva’s conceptualization of the *dharmadhātu* is progressively sharpened as the clouds of ego and defilements fall away through efforts of purification. It is by the sixth birth stage, Gómez writes, that the bodhisattvas of the

¹²¹ Edgerton (1953) 2014, vol. 2, p. 59.

¹²² Q.v. n. 26. As stated above, *abhisambodhi*, or “perfect enlightenment”—as it is given in the ninth of the *bodhisattvajanmas*—acts a potential indicator of the enlightened state more broadly, thus encompassing the attainment of advanced bodhisattvas, in contrast to *samyaksambodhi* (full buddhahood).

¹²³ *Daśabhūmika Sutra* 26.2 (Vaidya 1967, p. 26); see Edgerton (1953) 2014, vol. 2, p. 59.

¹²⁴ Williams (1989) 2009, p. 137. The bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra are the bodhisattvas at the highest levels of attainment in the text, and—particularly in the case of Samantabhadra—seem to have attained a level of awakening higher than all other *kalyāṇa-mitras*. Moreover, the Gv’s *bhūmi* system includes an eleventh *bhūmi*, beyond the tenth, or “coronation stage,” called “gone to the most precious seat of enlightenment” (*bodhimaṇḍavaragata*). This stage is also called the *tathāgatabhūmi* in the text, q.v. n. 18.

¹²⁵ Gómez 1977, p. 234.

Gaṅḍavyūha Sutra have entered into “the family of the Tathāgatas (i.e., buddhas),” fully comprehending the own-nature (*svabhāva*) of all *dharmas*, and thus “the true nature of the *Dharmadhātu*.”¹²⁶ This sixth level is therefore “a stage of oneness and identity” with the *dharmadhātu*, in which bodhisattvas comprehend their sameness with the collective *dharmakāya* of “the buddhas of the universe.”¹²⁷ This is the stage at which the earliest layer of Mahayana thought typically places the bodhisattva’s attainment of the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*), or enlightenment. The *Gaṅḍavyūha Sutra*, which has extended the number of both perfections and bodhisattva *bhūmis* from six to ten, is however rather opaque concerning what status the sixth level signifies in this context.¹²⁸

It is the seventh *bhūmi*, however, that is “non-regressing” (*avivartyā*) in the *Gaṅḍavyūha*, the level at which bodhisattvas in this text attain irreversibility.¹²⁹ Similarly, the seventh bodhisattva birth stage indicates that a bodhisattva of this level “does not turn back from abiding in the ocean of manifold bodhisattva virtues.”¹³⁰ Irreversible status in turn elucidates the practitioner’s entrance into advanced bodhisattvahood, as we have seen above. Gómez eloquently describes this stage as follows:

The Bodhisattva goes beyond mere reunion with the essence of Buddhahood into the higher attainment of acquiring the powers of a Buddha which are his as heir to Buddhahood. For the first time he is able to produce his own apparitional bodies (*nirmāṇa*). For he has truly understood in what sense the world is like a dream.¹³¹

In the seventh stage, the bodhisattva thus fully comprehends that the teachings of the buddhas on earth are merely “equal to an echo”—that they are mere emanations of the *dharmakāya* coterminous with the Dharma realm.¹³²

Furthermore, the “powers of a buddha” acquired by the bodhisattva in this stage include, perhaps most importantly, “the power to control, generate, and manipulate reality” (*adhiṣṭhāna*).¹³³ At 287.13 in the text, we are told that bodhisattvas of the sixth *bhūmi* first obtain a “*samādhi* that reveals to them the controlling power of the

¹²⁶ Gómez 1977, p. 246.

¹²⁷ Gómez 1977, p. 246.

¹²⁸ As noted above, there are—at points—the addition of an eleventh *bhūmi* in texts including the Gv.

¹²⁹ Gv 74.23. While these ten stages are called “*jñāna-bhūmis*” rather than simply “*bhūmis*” in this passage, the same list appears in another book of the *Avataṃsaka Sutra*, which is no longer extant in Sanskrit (T no. 281), and in turn corresponds to T no. 278 (bks. 7, 11) and T no. 279 (bks. 11, 15). See Gómez 1967, p. lxxiii, n. 2.

¹³⁰ Gv 287.18: *na pratyudāvartate nānābodhisattvaguṇasamudropasthānāya*.

¹³¹ Gómez 1977, p. 246.

¹³² Gv. 287.21: “He perceives the dharma wheels of all *tathāgatas* as being equal to an echo” (*pratiśrutkopamāni sarvatathāgatadharmacakrāṇi prajānāti*).

¹³³ Osto 2008, p. 24.

buddhas” (*buddhādhiṣṭhānadarśanasamādhau*).¹³⁴ Bodhisattvas then utilize this power in the seventh *bhūmi*, specifically in terms of their ability to begin to produce emanations. According to Gómez, *vikurvita* (the act of transforming the Dharma body) and *vikurvāṇa* (the Dharma body’s “transformation”) are two terms that equate to “events and objects magically produced by a Buddha [or advanced bodhisattva],” with *adhiṣṭhāna* being the power that fuels this transformative process.¹³⁵ The result—that is, the endless production of emanated forms, be they bodies or visions (*vyūha*)—is termed *nirmāṇa* or *nirmita*. It is therefore the seventh *janmabhūmi* that sets the stage for the expansion of the advanced bodhisattvas’ powers as they progress. The text states:

Here, O son of a good family, the bodhisattva . . . realizes his control of the creation of all forms (*rūpa*), which are equal to reflections, [and] has obtained the mastery of transforming [himself] via the higher knowledges (*abhijñā*), which is equal to the production of illusory emanations.¹³⁶

Thus, it is in this seventh phase that bodhisattvas have harnessed, albeit not yet perfected, the ability to create emanated forms at will. It is only in the eighth stage, according to the same passage, that bodhisattvas attain mastery of the full range of *samādhis*.¹³⁷ This allows for a higher level of insight into transforming (*vikurvita*) the Dharma body.¹³⁸ As the text states, a bodhisattva of the eighth birth stage “fully comprehends, by means of methods of contemplation, the ways of all ideations (of forms) which are the supports of all *dharmas*.”¹³⁹ In the context of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*, *viññapti*, which Gómez translates as “ideation,” is the initial mental conception in the bodhisattva’s process of generating forms. Further, the process of creation and/or manipulation of forms by means of the bodhisattva’s

¹³⁴ Gv. 287.13.

¹³⁵ Gómez 1967, pp. 48–49.

¹³⁶ Gv 287.16–20.

¹³⁷ The text states of the eighth *janmabhūmi*: “And having obtained the highest perfection, he is a master in all the *samādhis* of the bodhisattvas” (*sarvabodhisattvasamādhiṣu ca vaṣī bhavati paramapāramitāprāptaḥ*). Gv 287.27–28.

¹³⁸ Gómez writes: “Going beyond the common ground of the Mahāyāna, the Gv is trying to establish an equation between the true nature of *dharmas*, the *Dharmadhātu*, the ultimate essence of Buddhahood, and the Bodhisattva’s course (*caryā*) represented by the functions of the Form Body. To this purpose, the sūtra expands the notion of *rddhi*. The principal fruit of concentration and trance [*samādhi*] is presented then as the attainment of the faculty of reproducing reality. Thus, the Bodhisattva’s course is often described as consisting in the display of these fantastic manifestations, the *vikurvāṇa*, which show, on a cognitive level, the emptiness of all things (*dharmas*)” (1977, pp. 234–35).

¹³⁹ Gv 276.32–277–1: *Sarvadharmārambaṇāni sarvaviññaptipathāṃs ca bhāvanayā anugacchati*. The use of “*ca*” in this verse connects it with the previous in a large list of bodhisattva attainments of the eighth *janmabhūmi*.

controlling power (*adhiṣṭhāna*) takes place through “the methods of contemplation,” that is, within the state of *samādhi*. It is by mastering the perfect knowledge of all *samādhis* in the eighth stage, then, that the bodhisattva attains the ability to create specified form bodies and manifest arrays according to the dispositions of the beings they teach.

In the following passage, we have direct evidence that the ninth *bhūmi* equates with the bodhisattva's attainment of *abhisambodhi*, or perfect enlightenment. In order to demonstrate the full breadth of the ninth-*bhūmi* bodhisattva attainments of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*, I include here a translation of the majority of the passage.

Here (in this birth), O son of a good family, the bodhisattva controls manifold arrays of buddha fields everywhere in a moment of thought, and has attained the utmost perfection of fearlessness in the emanations of beings, and has obtained skillfulness in the emanations of buddhas, and has completely purified confidence in the emanations of *dharmas*, and is one whose scope of action is the unobstructed space of the Dharma realm, and is skillful in the control of the ideation of all bodies according to (beings') dispositions, and is skillful in the teaching of fathomless beings, and expresses perfect enlightenment through various actions.¹⁴⁰

The passage is completed with a summary verse:

Those of great disposition, who bring all beings to maturity,
 who completely purify the dissemination of their field of *dharmas*,
 who create arrays (*vyūha*) by means of the transformative power possessed by
 the buddhas,
 theirs is this ninth [bodhisattva] birth.¹⁴¹

Throughout the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*, we have the repeated association of *nirmāṇa* and *vyūha* with perfect enlightenment (*abhisambodhi*), and *vyūha* is taken as the *vikurvita* of enlightened beings. Gómez argues that “illusory manifestations,” what I am terming *vyūha* in this context, are the result or “embodiment” of the *kalyāṇamitra*'s specific bodhisattva-liberations (*vimokṣas*).¹⁴² He writes: “The *vimokṣa* produces illusory manifestations, as unreal as a mirage, yet constituting doors to release.”¹⁴³ Gómez's assertion sheds light on the purpose of the *vimokṣas*, which

¹⁴⁰ Gv 287.4–9. Cf. Gómez 1977, p. 255. The key line for my argument here is Gv. 287.7–8: *nānācaryābhisambodhi samdarsakaś ca bhavati*.

¹⁴¹ Gv 290.7–10; “*vyūha*” appears to be a verse formation of *vyūha*, which occurs in twenty-four places in the Gv, almost without exception within verses.

¹⁴² Gómez 1977, p. 230.

¹⁴³ Gómez 1977, p. 231.

are therefore not meant for liberating the bodhisattva who possesses it, but rather to aid the bodhisattva in liberating others (i.e., Sudhana).¹⁴⁴ A *vyūha*, in Gómez's view, is thus a manifest or embodied extension of an individuated teaching (*vimokṣa*).¹⁴⁵

An example of such a *vyūha* among the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* narratives is that of the earth goddess Sthāvarā (k-m no. 31), the first goddess of the text. As the narrative begins, Sudhana travels to meet Sthāvarā in the region of Magadha at the site of the Buddha's enlightenment (the *bodhimaṇḍa* at Bodhgaya). As an entrance to her teaching, Sthāvarā manifests an array or vision (*vyūha*) of sheer splendor and might, including flowing waters, roaring animals, and rapidly blooming trees and flowers, as she, along with her retinue of earth goddesses numbering in the hundreds of thousands, rises up from the surface of the earth before Sudhana. Here, her role as earth goddess—causing the earth to be fruitful and plentifully fecund—is combined with the power of the bodhisattva to make the earth tremble, reveal boundless treasures of jewels, and emit a great radiant light throughout the landscape as countless bejeweled earth goddesses emerge from the earth's surface, manifesting themselves. Thus, in Sthāvarā's narrative, the quaking earth, emerging jewels, and ebullient light comprise the *vyūha* of an advanced bodhisattva.

Such emanated arrays of human forms and other spectacular visions demonstrate the virtuous friends' relative attainments on the path to enlightenment, indexing their power in the *dharmadhātu*. This *vyūha* is, in short, a visual metaphor for a divine female bodhisattva's soteriological attainment, that in turn reflects the power of the collective Dharma realm with which she is united.

In the ninth *bhūmi*, then, the bodhisattva's keen understanding of the Dharma realm becomes ever more lucid, demonstrating the ability to purify buddha fields with a Dharma body that is everywhere at once. Gómez uses Sudhana's praises of the manifold virtues of the night goddess Vāsantī (k-m no. 32) to illustrate an awakened being's Dharma body—"incorporeal, at peace, nondual"—which is one with "the

¹⁴⁴ Here, Gómez cites another important passage illustrating this process. He writes: "All *dharma*s are like acts of magic, like a mirage, like an echo," noting that this is a repeated trope in many sutras (1977, p. 231, n. 24; cf. Gv 417 et al.).

¹⁴⁵ Levering (1997, p. 154) discusses the arising of *vyūha* in a typical narrative of the Gv, as follows:

Each teacher describes how she or he first set out on the path, and her or his own means of progress on the path to supreme enlightenment. The teacher then describes the particular aspect of the practice of bodhisattvas that she or he has come to understand [the bodhisattva's *vimokṣa*], as well as the virtues and powers she or he has attained, and creates a display of magical power [*vyūha*]. Sometimes we are told that this causes Sudhana to attain a new level of *samādhi* (concentration), which brings about in him this same understanding of the path, virtue, and powers.

Dharmadhātu itself.”¹⁴⁶ He thus uses the night goddess Vāsantī as an example of an “awakened” bodhisattva.¹⁴⁷ The passage states:

Your Dharma body is exceedingly pure,
 Equal in the three times, without distinguishing qualities.
 Therein the entire assembled world arises
 And dissolves without hindrance.¹⁴⁸

Here we see that the advanced bodhisattva is both individuated and non-individuated, being one with the nature of the *dharmadhātu* itself. Gómez uses this passage to assert that, like the Dharma realm, the bodhisattva's Dharma body “represents the totality of all *dharmas*, [as] seen in their identity with non-essence.”¹⁴⁹ Because of its “non-essence,” or fundamental emptiness, the Dharma body is essentially free from distinguishing characteristics. That said, the Dharma body's empty nature simultaneously “acquiesces” to endless transformations of form produced by enlightened bodhisattvas, including—as we see here—the form of the night goddess Vāsantī.¹⁵⁰ Osto describes this as the second level of the *dharmadhātu*,¹⁵¹ called the *dharmadhātutalabheda* (“the differentiated levels of the Dharma realm”). I see it as the manifest conceptual plane held in tension with the unmanifest, and thus a secondary ideation—*dharmas* (phenomena) arising from inherent emptiness—in which the bodhisattva *bhūmis* may be grasped.

The underlying phenomena referenced in Vāsantī's passage above are further explicated in a section from the narrative of the bodhisattva Maitreya. Here, the bodhisattva Maitreya describes the awakened bodhisattvas of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* thus:

They abide in the abode of the non-differentiation of one field, which consists in the presence of all fields within one field; the compatibility of one *dharma* with all *dharmas*, consists in the presence of all *dharmas* in one *dharma*; they abide in the abode of non-multiplicity within one living being, which consists in the presence of all beings in one living being.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁶ Gómez writes (1977, p. 234): “Because of this identity with the *Dharmadhātu*, the Awakened possess two bodies, a Dharma body (*dharmasārīra*),” or *dharmakāya*, which is conceived of as one and the same with the “immutable” and pure ground (or indivisible, pure quality) of *dharmadhātu*, “and . . . [a] ‘Form Body’ (*rūpaśārīra*),” corresponding to the Dharma body's changeable and impermanent “manifestations’ (*dharmadhātutalabheda*).” This is literally the “divided ground”—that is, the distinguished qualities—of the *dharmadhātu* and its emanated *vyūhas* (manifested arrays).

¹⁴⁷ Gómez 1977, p. 234.

¹⁴⁸ Gv 181.5–8.

¹⁴⁹ Gómez 1977, p. 234.

¹⁵⁰ Gómez 1977, p. 234.

¹⁵¹ Osto 2008, pp. 19–24.

¹⁵² Translation from Gómez 1977, p. 237. Gómez's translation here sheds light on the idea that, while “the awakened possess two bodies,” these distinctions are merely artificial categories meant to

This passage elucidates the non-differentiation of the *dharmadhātu*, namely as the one unified field from which all *dharmas* arise. The *dharmadhātu* thus contains all *dharmas*. So, too, all fields—composed of *dharmas*—arise from this single, unified field that is, according to Gómez, “the metaphysical foundation behind all appearances.”¹⁵³ The refraction of endless phenomena within the one is perpetually limitless, as are the refractions of the endless world realms that bodhisattva-goddesses display as *vyūha* in the text. What is more, these refractions flow in both directions. Awakened bodhisattvas, who are one with *dharmadhātu*, have *dharma* bodies that “reflect all things” and in turn “are reflected in them.”¹⁵⁴

A point that further solidifies Vāsantī’s ninth-*bhūmi* status is, moreover, her momentous abilities as a bodhisattva and *dharmabhāṇaka* (preacher of the Dharma). A major difference between Gaṅgādevī in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sutra* and the bodhisattva-goddesses of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* is that the latter are not preparing themselves for a future role as one who will attain full and complete buddhahood. They are, rather, carrying out these actions in the present moment. For example, Vāsantī states:

My eyes actively seek out the likenesses of all beings that exist in the ocean of world realms. Whatsoever the measure of difference in disposition, moral faculties, and inclinations of those beings, I control a body differentiated according to those standards, having taken on [such a form] for their ripening and instruction. Thus, this liberation expands in each moment of thought; by means of concentration, [it] expands, pervades, and spreads throughout the Dharma realm.¹⁵⁵

Vāsantī here states that she controls (*adhitiṣṭhāmi*)—that is, creates and empowers—a body according to the *āśaya* (inclinations or dispositions) of every being. From this, it appears to be the case that we may identify each *kalyāṇa-mitra* in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* who produces and manifests emanations according to the disposition of the beings to be taught (i.e., Sudhana) as a ninth-stage bodhisattva.

Lastly, we see that Vāsantī—unlike Gaṅgādevī in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*—is able to enter limitless buddha fields in female form. Here, the night goddess states:

By means of the uninterrupted mind, I pervade with the body, as many buddha fields as there are atomic particles in hundreds of thousands of buddha fields. . . . Whatever the Dharma instruction of these Lord Bud-

aid beings in an approximate conception of these phenomena, which are ultimately unfathomable. This is the expanded Mahayana Buddhist ontology that the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* lays out.

¹⁵³ Gómez 1977, p. 234.

¹⁵⁴ Gómez 1977, p. 234. As Gómez writes, “With this [dharma] body,” which emanates forms and *vyūha*, “they pervade all worlds and display the reflections of each world in all other worlds within every speck of dust.”

¹⁵⁵ Gv 180.15–18.

dhas, the whole of it I comprehend, undertake, reflect upon, and hold in my mind; and [with regard to] the oceans of previous lives of those *tathāgatas*, I fully comprehend their ocean of vows.¹⁵⁶

While the bodhisattva-goddess Vāsantī demonstrates the attainment of enlightenment, there is very little information in her narrative that would prove, in comparison with the tenth bodhisattva birth stage of the *Gaṅḍavyūha Sutra*, that she has attained the highest *bhūmi*. In Sudhana's praise of the bodhisattva Maitreya, he states that the bodhisattva is "established in the coronation stage (*abhisheka bhūmi*)."¹⁵⁷ This is the tenth stage of bodhisattvahood, the stage "of the bodhisattva who obtains coronation."¹⁵⁸ To demonstrate true gender equity in this context would be to show that a female bodhisattva can, like the future buddha Maitreya, attain the coronation stage, or the tenth level of bodhisattvahood as laid out at 74.19 in the text.

Certain goddesses who Sudhana visits after Vāsantī do, however, describe their attainments in a manner that convincingly aligns with the *Gaṅḍavyūha's* characterization of the tenth stage. First, the night goddess, Pramuditānayanajagadvirocānā (k-m no. 34), describes attainments which align closely to the *Gaṅḍavyūha's* tenth-stage bodhisattvas. We find a key passage for this comparison in the verse that accompanies this prose description of the tenth *janmabhūmi*:

Those who have entered into the increasing, impelling force of
omniscience,
according to the powers of the victors,
who act without hindrance in the system (*naya*) of the differentiated
levels of the Dharma realm,
theirs is this tenth birth of the victors' true sons.¹⁵⁹

Similarly, in describing her attainments to Sudhana, the bodhisattva-goddess Pramuditānayanajagadvirocānā states:

And I have also, O son of Sugata, descended into the course of conduct of
the bodhisattva Samantabhadra.
I fully comprehend the oceanic system of the ten differentiated
levels of the Dharma realm.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Gv 180.7–14.

¹⁵⁷ Gv 371.31–372.3.

¹⁵⁸ Gv 74.19.

¹⁵⁹ Gv 290.11–14. In this verse *sarvajñatā* (omniscience) is synonymous with enlightenment, q.v. n. 98. Further, the oldest Chinese translation of the text, ca. 388–408 CE (T no. 294 by Shengjian), ends after this night goddess's narrative. See Gómez (1967, p. xxiv; cited in Osto 2009a, p. 166, n. 7).

¹⁶⁰ Gv 201.25–26.

These levels are reflected metaphorically in the ten consecutive floors (*tala*) of Maitreya's tower (*kūṭāgāra*) in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*.¹⁶¹ Here, we see that the one ground of reality is, in its nature as physical form, an ocean of endless divisions and realms of bodhisattva action, represented specifically by ten. In the manner of a tenth-stage bodhisattva, the night goddess Pramuditānayanajagadvirocānā has mastered this system wherein she acts without hindrance, having also descended into the course of conduct of Samantabhadra. As mentioned above, Samantabhadra, whose name translates to “universally good,” appears to be the bodhisattva with the highest level of attainment in the text. Achieving the course of conduct of this bodhisattva, who—as Osto suggests—is the “chief-minister” of Vairocana, exemplifies the primary goal of all bodhisattvas in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*.¹⁶² That Pramuditānayanajagadvirocānā has mastered it, along with “fully comprehending” the fathomless principles of the ten divisions of the Dharma realm, signals that she has reached the highest level of attainment possible for a *kalyāṇa-mitra* in the text.

The second major piece of evidence of the enlightenment of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s bodhisattva-goddesses, although not a part of the earliest Chinese translation, is found in the narrative of the night goddess Praśāntarutasāgaravatī (k-m no. 36).¹⁶³ She describes her *maṇḍala* of practice (*yoga*) in which she undertakes the actions of infinite buddhas (*aprameyatathāgata*). Here she states:

In the oceans of all manifestations, I establish the levels of the assemblage (*maṇḍala*) of knowledge [of the *tathāgatas*] of the three times . . . by the practice of dwelling in the ocean of the aspects of magical transformations at the juncture of the ascent to the stage (*bhūmi*) of infinite *tathāgatas*.¹⁶⁴

We can then fruitfully compare this passage to a prose section of the tenth *janmabhūmi*, to support the night-goddesses' enlightened bodhisattva status:

This, O son of a good family, is the tenth birth of the bodhisattva named “Womb of the Impelling Force of the Bodhisattva's Ascent to the Level of the Buddhas (*tathāgatabhūmi*).”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ For an in-depth discussion see Osto (2008, pp. 19–24). These divisions appear to be at least somewhat reflective of the ten levels of bodhisattvahood.

¹⁶² Osto 2008, pp. 69–71.

¹⁶³ This narrative is a part of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, however, circa 420 CE (Osto 2009a, p. 166).

¹⁶⁴ Gv 228.11–21. The relevant phrase here is as follows: *aprameyatathāgatabhūmyākramaṇasamādhi-vikurvītakalpasāgarasamvasanayogena*.

¹⁶⁵ Gv 288.21–22: *idaṃ kulaputra bodhisattvānāṃ tathāgatabhūmyākramaṇavegagarbhaṃ nāma daśamaṃ bodhisattvajanma*. I have borrowed the phrase “impelling force” in this translation from that of Gómez 1977, pp. 256–57. “*Garbha*,” in the context of the passages on the *janmabhūmis*, can also be productively taken to mean “source.”

We see here that Praśantarutasāgaravatī, while obviously not a son of a *jina* (i.e., a “victor” or *tathāgata*), has also attained the tenth stage. This is due to her position in the tenth *bhūmi* (or “coronation stage”) described as that in which bodhisattvas quickly ascend to the level of the *tathāgatas*, those who have attained unsurpassed perfect enlightenment.¹⁶⁶

Lastly, a third major piece of evidence that suggests complete gender equity in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* appears in the narrative of the night goddess Sarvanagararakṣa-saṃbhavatejaḥśrī (k-m no. 37). In a passage previously mentioned by Osto, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* states that this night goddess “has a body that faces all beings, is equal in all worlds” and, most importantly for our purposes here, “shares its essence (*svabhāva*) with the *tathāgatas*” (*tathāgatasvabhāvena kāyena*).¹⁶⁷ We find a direct parallel here to the description of the tenth *janmabhūmi*, wherein the text states:

Here, son of a good family, the bodhisattva becomes pure in principle (*naya*) becoming one (*ekībhāva*) with the *tathāgatas* of the three times.¹⁶⁸

Beyond the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*, circa the second half of the third century, we find evidence that there was more openness to advanced female bodhisattvas in later middle-period sutras as well.¹⁶⁹ Outside of material that may have constituted later additions to the text, there is evidence of divine and advanced female bodhisattvas in the *Suvarṇaprabhāsottama Sutra* (ca. fifth century CE). In it, the goddess Sarasvatī is lauded for her *prajñā* (enlightened wisdom) and clearly bestows *dhāraṇī* (here, superhuman powers of memory), as is characteristic of enlightened female bodhisattvas in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*. The goddess Śrī also tells us that she has planted roots of merit under a previous buddha, a metaphor which—as mentioned above—is often used for the practices of early-stage bodhisattvas. Like many Mahayana sutras, as Harrison notes, this text remains silent—albeit not entirely—with regard to assigning the term “bodhisattva” to goddesses who respond to the rituals of devotees therein.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁶ In the Gv, the *tathāgatabhūmi*—as in other Mahayana sources—seems to be the level beyond the tenth *bhūmi* (i.e., the *abhiṣekha* or “coronation” stage; q.v. n. 156 above); cf. Jorgensen et al. 2019, pp. 35–36, n. 52. “*Tathāgatabhūmi*” (inclusive of alternate endings) is mentioned eleven times in the text and warrants further investigation.

¹⁶⁷ Osto 2008, p. 98.

¹⁶⁸ Gv 288.13: *iha kulaputra bodhisattvo vivikto bhavati sarvatryadhvatathāgataikībhāvaviṣaye*.

¹⁶⁹ Q.v. n. 7. Here I follow Gómez (1967) and take the *terminus ante quem* to be the middle of the third century CE.

¹⁷⁰ See Harrison 1987. More challenging to date, the *Mahāvastu* also explicitly prohibits advanced female bodhisattvas. For more on the development of this text in the first half of the first millennium CE, see Tournier 2017. The Yogācāra treatise *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (of approximately the fourth century CE), and the *Abhidharmakośa* of Vasubandhu, ca. the fourth to fifth century CE, also prohibit advanced female bodhisattvas. See Anālayo 2009, p. 180, n. 53; Paul (1979) 1985, p. 212, n. 7; Buswell and Lopez 2013, pp. 135, 961.

As I have argued above, the initial prohibition on enlightened female bodhisattvas in the early Mahayana thus appears to have had a lingering effect on text authors.¹⁷¹ Lastly, however, the *Sarvatathāgatādhiṣṭhāna Sutra* (a manuscript from Gilgit ca. sixth century CE) names its female deities as “bodhisattvas” explicitly and includes the Buddha’s *vyākaraṇa* of the future buddhahood of his divine female interlocutors, also without the mention of a change in sex. My findings therefore demonstrate that the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* acts as an important forerunner to the increased presence of advanced bodhisattva-goddesses in Mahayana texts of the latter part of the middle period of Indian Buddhism.

5. *A Surprising Twist: New Light on the Bodhisattva Ontology of the Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*

Looking closely at the powers and attainments of the wide span of the fifty-three *kalyāṇa-mitras*, one begins to question the notion that each consecutive virtuous friend is of a progressively higher bodhisattva stage. In this final section, I probe deeply into the underlying ontology of the *kalyāṇa-mitras*, and how they may be related to one another. As noted, there is not a seamless progression of bodhisattva attainments among them. For example, the *upāsikā Āśā* (k-m no. 8) manifests what appears to be a *vyūha*. She displays ornately ornamented, jewel-encrusted, and dazzlingly beautiful landscapes, with countless light rays emanating from luminescent bodhisattva bodies.¹⁷²

The night goddesses, however, produce visions that appear much more spectacular than those of their predecessors, as Sudhana observes celestial arrays of countless buddha lands in the sky above him. It is evident that their attainments are very high indeed.¹⁷³ Thus, what are we to make of so many highly advanced teachers who nonetheless appear to be placed in at least a somewhat hierarchical order of bodhisattva attainments themselves? Why do the fifty-three *kalyāṇa-mitras*, who appear to emanate *vyūhas* throughout the text, only make mention of tenth-*bhūmi* abilities in the last section (i.e., that of the night goddesses and above)? In his chapter-length study of the text, Gómez writes:

¹⁷¹ According to the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, for example, “a woman will not realize the awakening of a Buddha because already an advanced bodhisattva has left behind womanhood for good and will not be reborn again as a female” (Anālayo 2009, p. 180, n. 53). See also the passages in the *Mahāratnakūṭa*, wherein the eight-year-old female—described as a “*bodhisattva-mahāsattva*” in the text—states: “In my [buddha] land there will be no evil, evil destinies, or the name of woman” (Paul [1979] 1985, p. 207).

¹⁷² See, for example, the translation of Āśā’s narrative in Paul (1979) 1985, pp. 138–40 and Cleary (1984) 1993, pp. 1208–10.

¹⁷³ Osto has, for example, discussed the arrangement of the night goddesses in a *maṇḍala*-like formation around the *bodhimāṇḍa* (or “seat of enlightenment”) at Bodhgaya as representative of their connection with Vairocana. See Osto 2009a, pp. 169–71.

It would be a great mistake to attempt to force the *Gv* into a system or path-map. Although the text itself claims that each *kalyāṇa-mitra* stands one step above the preceding one, there is no clue whatsoever as to why this is so.¹⁷⁴

As the basis for his assertion of this step-by-step progression, Gómez here cites the rotely repetitive section at the close of nearly every narrative, in which “the *kalyāṇa-mitra* in question confesses his limitations.”¹⁷⁵ He then states: “There is no hint as to the reason why one *vimokṣa* is superior to another, or for that matter, whether one *vimokṣa* is or is not superior to another.”¹⁷⁶ His statement here on the obscurity of the soteriological status of each bodhisattva’s *vimokṣa* (liberation), and their sense of progression or lack thereof, is certainly valid. However, with his statement prior to this—that “there is no clue whatsoever” as to why “each *kalyāṇa-mitra* stands one step above the preceding one”—I must respectfully disagree.¹⁷⁷ With the benefit of more recent digital resources, as well as Gómez’s and Osto’s prior studies, I put forward two postulates. First, fundamentally, the role of an advanced bodhisattva is to produce physical manifestations in whatever form will most benefit the individual to be taught. Therefore, I submit that it is *not* the *kalyāṇa-mitras* who appear to incrementally rise in bodhisattva attainments and soteriological status as we progress through the narratives, it is rather the one that they teach, Sudhana. By the very nature of the text’s ontology, the bodhisattvas, who throughout the text convey their advanced status through their ability to manifest visions (*vyūha*) in the human realm, take on the form that will most benefit Sudhana in the specific context of that particular teaching (i.e., their *vimokṣa*). In reading the text, it becomes clear that each *kalyāṇa-mitra*’s individuated *vimokṣa* is indeed a teaching or “liberation” meant specifically for him.¹⁷⁸ I therefore propose that what we are actually seeing is Sudhana’s rise in realization and attainments, not those of the *kalyāṇa-mitras*. It is he who outlines the attainments of each consecutive teacher in his verses (*gāthās*) of praise, and—like any accomplished magician—they have the powers sufficient to show him precisely what they want him to see. A major theme of the text is that the bodhisattva is “hard to know,” hard to see, and only with guides, and certain other extraordinary qualities, will one be able to

¹⁷⁴ Gómez 1977, p. 244.

¹⁷⁵ Gómez 1977, p. 260, n. 50.

¹⁷⁶ Gómez 1977, pp. 260–61, n. 50.

¹⁷⁷ When Gómez’s chapter was published, there was neither access to Thomas Cleary’s complete, although at points problematic, translation of the text ([1984] 1993), nor to the complete searchable digitization of the sutra (GRETIL 2001–19). To my mind, without these tools, even the most eminent Sanskritists would find it challenging to make heads or tails of the text’s repetitive, obscure, and internally context-driven soteriological system and “path-map.”

¹⁷⁸ Certain goddess narratives make similar statements explicitly in the text.

grasp these teachings and advance toward enlightenment and omniscience.¹⁷⁹ Thus, because of the virtuous friends' broad-based production of *vyūhas*, for one, how can we really say which bodhisattva is more advanced than the other when they are indeed a mirror of Sudhana's present state of attainment, providing merely the next level of teachings necessary?

One response to this question might be a pointed study of the "statement of ignorance" section at the end of a vast majority of the narratives. Surely these statements show us what one bodhisattva knows that another does not? Yet, in looking at the broad span of such statements, one begins to question their legitimacy as in many instances they appear to contradict the *kalyāṇa-mitra*'s prior statements of their own attainments made earlier in the same narrative. A particularly clear example in the text is that of the night goddess Vāsantī.

At the close of her narrative, as is typical for the majority of the virtuous friends, including two of the five friends explicitly named "bodhisattvas" (Avalokiteśvara and Ananyagāmin), Vāsantī's rhetorical questions then appear to disprove her attainments. She asks:

How am I able to know the practice, tell of the virtues and scope, or demonstrate the miraculous liberations (*vimokṣa*) of bodhisattvas who are adept in the vow of the infinitely-varied bodhisattva activity of Samantabhadra, [and] who hold the power to enter into, and advance (*prasara*) in, the oceanic methods of the Dharma realm?¹⁸⁰

Just two lines prior to this, however, in enumerating her considerable bodhisattva attainments to Sudhana, Vāsantī states, "Thus, in each moment of thought, by the practice of advancing (*prasara*), pervading, and expanding in the Dharma realm, this bodhisattva liberation expands."¹⁸¹ This description of her practice (*yoga*) appears to counter the rhetorical question above, which conversely implies that she is *not* able to "enter into and advance" in a full realization of the Dharma realm. This questioning also appears to negate the miraculous activity of Vāsantī's specific teaching or bodhisattva liberation (*vimokṣa*), which she produces and describes from the very outset of her narrative. While one could argue that these "statements of ignorance" are a matter of finite degrees of attainment, I have located this pattern in many virtuous friend narratives.

¹⁷⁹ See, for example, Cleary (1984) 1993, p. 1351.

¹⁸⁰ Gv 180.19–27. It is worth noting that my translation diverges from Cleary's to a great extent here (cf. Cleary [1984] 1993, p. 1293). Moreover, the bodhisattva activity (*bodhisattvacaryā*) of Samantabhadra is the general goal of bodhisattvas in the text; cf. Gv 175.16–19, wherein Vāsantī expresses her intention to lead all beings to omniscience through the great vow of Samantabhadra (*samantabhadreṇa mahāpranīdhānena sarvajñatāyām upanayeyam*).

¹⁸¹ Gv 180.17–18.

The “statements of ignorance,” to my mind, instead align with the semantic wordplay that we often see in the sutras when it comes to the Mahayana doctrine of *dharmas*, namely, that whatever “is” actually “isn’t.” As Gómez writes, quoting what he calls “a stock phrase of the Mahāyāna” from the *Samādhirāja Sutra* and the “Gv’s favorite image”:

It is as when a well-trained magician displays his magic, showing forms of many kinds, yet no form can be apprehended. Nor should one think of apprehending the unapprehendable; in apprehension [itself] there is no apprehension.¹⁸²

Thus, indeed, in a semantic and doctrinally motivated riddle of sorts, how could these *kalyāṇa-mitras* truly know what it is they profess to know? These so-called “statements of ignorance” instead appear to point the reader directly to the emptiness of *dharmas*, the non-arising of thoughts, assertions, and grasping at any bodhisattva attainment whatsoever. Importantly, such statements also work to propel the overarching narrative forward, keeping Sudhana highly motivated to go forth, meet his next spiritual guide, and receive the subsequent teaching necessary to progress.

To complicate matters further, towards the close of the text, the bodhisattva Maitreya reveals that it is actually Mañjuśrī who, with the exception of Samantabhadra, is the highest in attainment here among the bodhisattvas of the text. The bodhisattva Maitreya states, as per Osto’s translation:

Sudhana, as many good friends [*kalyāṇa-mitras*] as you have seen, as many entrances into courses of conduct as you have heard, as many principles of liberations as you have penetrated, as many properties of vows as you have plunged into—all should be seen as the authority (*anubhāva*) and power (*adhiṣṭhāna*) of the princely Mañjuśrī.¹⁸³

With this statement, I would suggest that the bodhisattva Maitreya “reveals the secret of all the bodhisattvas in the text” (*sarvabodhisattvagubhyānām samdarśakah*).¹⁸⁴ This is the revelation that all of the virtuous friends, their specific teachings/liberations (*vimokṣa*), and even the specific aspects of the vows that Sudhana has entered into along this great journey, are all to be understood as the *anubhāva* (authority) and

¹⁸² Gómez 1977, p. 226. Gómez continues here, stating: “Thus the ultimate purpose of the doctrine of illusion [i.e., of the own-nature (*svabhāva*) of *dharmas*] appears to be paradoxically to offer a foundation for the theory of salvation from illusion: a negative view of knowledge and conduct in which non-attachment is reified as illusory thought and action, and thus identified with the world’s emptiness” (1977, p. 226).

¹⁸³ Gv 418.27–29.

¹⁸⁴ See also the prior prose line at Gv 418.22–26.

controlling power (*adhiṣṭhāna*) of the princely bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. In other words, Maitreya tells us here that all *kalyāṇa-mitra* bodhisattvas (with the likely exception of Samantabhadra) are indeed magical transformations (*vikurvita*) that Mañjuśrī has emanated according to Sudhana's specific dispositions and requirements in order that he might eventually attain complete and perfect enlightenment.¹⁸⁵

All of the virtuous friends are therefore indeed emanations of Mañjuśrī, who—the text states—has obtained the highest perfection.¹⁸⁶ If this is indeed the case, then we would assume that all virtuous friends are also by default equal to him in their stage of bodhisattva attainments as his emanations. Many questions arise, then, in terms of the enlightened status of the bodhisattva-goddesses. For example, is the gender equity of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* therefore engineered by means of its *dharmadhātu/vyūha* system? Is this a method to bypass pronouncements of the sort mentioned in the *Mahāvastu* or *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (i.e., that bodhisattvas in female form cannot attain enlightenment)? In any case, this seems to have been a productive way to introduce goddess reverence into Mahayana contexts.

That said, are the goddesses, who have biographies that go back eons in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra*, actually “real” entities in their own right? This is, after all, the tension that Mahayana doctrine asks us to hold for all *dharmas*, and (however artificially) all bodhisattvas. If it is correct that they are emanations of Mañjuśrī, does this make them less valid as individual entities? In other words, one may ask, is this exercise of searching for gender equity for the bodhisattva-goddesses in this text even warranted?

I would argue that, due to the influence of Buddhist texts upon the lives of female practitioners both historically and today, it is certainly warranted. Levering persuasively makes the case for this methodology by comparing sutra narratives to Chan hagiographies of “women of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries” to gain a fuller sense of audience reception with regard to the stories of enlightened women practitioners.¹⁸⁷ Levering asserts that this “socially radical claim would have been a lot less credible without the

¹⁸⁵ It is at this moment that Sudhana again briefly encounters Mañjuśrī before going on to merge completely with the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, who Osto describes as “embodiment of the course of conduct” and “chief minister” of Vairocana (Osto 2008, pp. 69–71). Vaidya, incidentally, does not include Samantabhadra in the list of fifty-three *kalyāṇa-mitras*, instead taking Śrīsaṃbhava and Śrīmatī as k-m nos. 51–52, with Maitreya being k-m no. 53 (Gv, pp. v–vi; see also a discrepancy in Vaidya's numbering system at pp. xiii–xiv). Osto instead identifies Samantabhadra's role “at the top of the spiritual hierarchy” as the fifty-third *kalyāṇa-mitra*. He argues that the bodhisattva has attained “the realization of supreme enlightenment” and is “endowed with the power of a buddha” (Osto 2008, pp. 69–71).

¹⁸⁶ Gv 418.29: *sa ca mañjuśrīḥ kumārabbūtaḥ paramapāramitāprāptaḥ*. Again, this is apparently excluding the bodhisattva Samantabhadra, who himself does not seem to fit into the category of *kalyāṇa-mitra*.

¹⁸⁷ Levering 1997, p. 141.

Goddess tradition of the sutras [i.e., the *Gaṅḍavyūha*'s enlightened female figures]."¹⁸⁸ These sutra stories, "as well as a few stories of previous women Ch'an masters," she writes, "provided the only Buddhist models for how the category 'enlightened women' was to be constructed, [and] for how 'enlightened women' were to be understood."¹⁸⁹

How, then, is such a comparison with the *Gaṅḍavyūha*'s enlightened goddesses relevant today? A focus on the evidence for the enlightened bodhisattva status of the *Gaṅḍavyūha*'s goddesses gives rather exceptional examples of gender equity that moved the potential for enlightened female practitioners forward. Thus, the effect of the enlightened female bodhisattva and teacher—being one who has attained the soteriological ideal—had an impact on those who read or heard the sutra's teachings during the time that Chan flourished in China, as Levering shows. I would assert that the text may have the same impact today. We saw how an unattainable soteriological ideal, as per Appleton's study, can adversely affect the audience, wherein twentieth-century Buddhist women believed that their own gender was offensive. Given such real-world examples, it is not a stretch to state that the presence of gender equity in the sutra may beneficially affect current and prospective Buddhists and/or bodhisattvas even now. My intervention here is the view that if we say that the goddesses are "enlightened" we must show how we might know this to be the case, in order for this statement to be doctrinally, theoretically, and socially meaningful.

Conclusion

This study has focused on the question of gender equity in one early Mahayana text important throughout Asia, the *Gaṅḍavyūha Sutra*. While the Mahayana sutra corpus is over fifteen hundred years old, it holds sustained relevance for at least some Buddhist practitioners today, particularly when we study this corpus through the lens of an issue that continues to impact us roughly two millennia after Gaṅgādevī's prediction to male buddhahood: gender equity. Mahayana Buddhism, and Buddhism overall, is not at all a homogenous tradition regarding this issue. We have seen how certain lineages of teachers deemed it inappropriate to prohibit the advanced status of female bodhisattvas, for reasons now unknown to us. The relaxation of this prohibition was perhaps due to the illusory nature of gender in Mahayana philosophy or, in part, to the rise of goddess worship in ancient India (ca. fifth century CE). The Buddhist texts discussed here remain silent on the prospective gender of bodhisattva-goddesses once they eventually attain buddhahood. Nonetheless, as I have demonstrated through my comparison

¹⁸⁸ Levering 1997, p. 142. This is namely because such stories of "female Bodhisattvas and Goddesses" demonstrate "that important powers in the 'world' (*lokadhātu*) are portrayed as female powers" (Levering 1977, p. 142).

¹⁸⁹ Levering 1997, p. 142.

of the bodhisattva-goddesses with the characteristics of the ninth and tenth *bhūmis* above, we can identify a point in time in which enlightened female bodhisattvas arise in a Mahayana sutra, the *Gaṇḍavyūha* (ca. mid-third century CE for a majority of the text, ca. early fifth century CE for certain passages including those beyond k-m no. 34). I have also postulated a reason why the author(s) of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* may not have wanted to state this explicitly, that is, to not overtly go against the status quo of sex transformation (along with the view that women's bodies are filthy, and women's minds are inferior). While we may not be able to formulate definite answers to the questions that are worthy to be asked, given the contested nature of gender-equitable bodhisattvahood and the hesitant application of the term "bodhisattva" in this text, the significance is clear. We also see that at a certain point—perhaps slightly later than the narratives of roughly 0–250 CE—prohibitions on female bodhisattvahood were a topic of debate across Buddhist *nikāyas* and Mahayana textual sources.

It is also quite likely that these bodhisattvas of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* are all of an equal soteriological level due to their status as emanations of Mañjuśrī. From a doctrinal standpoint, we know that the forms which the *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s bodhisattvas take are created according to Sudhana's disposition, so that he may receive a particular teaching. That said, the specific form that a bodhisattva takes in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* is nonetheless of great significance culturally and historically. By appearing as enlightened female bodhisattvas, the text presents goddesses as both followers of the bodhisattva path and idealized figures of Mahayana soteriology, who in turn have the power to impact present-day Buddhist perspectives.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AsP *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. Edited by P. L. Vaidya. Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, 4. Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1960. Göttingen Registry of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (GRETIL) version, 2001–19. *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita*. http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/4_rellit/buddh/bsu049_u.htm.
- Gv *Gaṇḍavyūhasūtra*. Edited by P. L. Vaidya. Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, 5. Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning, 1960. Göttingen Registry of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages (GRETIL) version, 2001–19. http://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/1_sanskr/4_rellit/buddh/bsu016_u.htm.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–35.

REFERENCES

- Allon, Mark, and Richard Salomon. 2010. "New Evidence for Mahayana in Early Gandhāra." *The Eastern Buddhist* 41, no. 1, pp. 1–22.
- Anālayo, Bhikkhu. 2009. "The *Bahudhātuka-sutta* and Its Parallels on Women's Inabilities." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 16, pp. 137–90.
- . 2015. "The Buddha's Past Life as a Princess in the *Ekottarika-āgama*." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 22, pp. 95–137.
- Appleton, Naomi. 2011. "In the Footsteps of the Buddha? Women and the Bodhisattva Path in Theravāda Buddhism." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 27, no. 1, pp. 33–51.
- Buswell, Robert E., Jr. and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., eds. 2013. *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ch'en, Kenneth Kuan Sheng. 1973. *Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Cleary, Thomas F. (1984) 1993. *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avataṃsaka Sutra*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Conze, Edward. 1973. *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses and Its Verse Summary*. Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation.
- Derris, Karen. 2008. "When the Buddha Was a Woman: Reimagining Tradition in the Theravāda." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 2, pp. 29–44.
- Dhammadinnā, Bhikkhunī. 2015. "Predictions of Women to Buddhahood in Middle-Period Literature." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 22, pp. 477–531.
- Dimitrov, Dragomir. 2004. "Two Female Bodhisattvas in Flesh and Blood." In *Aspects of the Female in Indian Culture, Proceedings of the Symposium in Marburg, Germany, July 7–8, 2000*, edited by Ulriche Roesler and Jayandra Soni, pp. 3–30. Marburg: Indica et Tibetica Verlag.
- Drewes, David. 2019. "Mahayana Sutras and the Opening of the Bodhisattva Path." Paper presented at the 18th IABS Congress, Toronto 2017, and updated 2019. <https://umanitoba.academia.edu/DavidDrewes>.
- Edgerton, Franklin. (1953) 2014. *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*. 2 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press. Cologne Digital Sanskrit Dictionaries. <https://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/BHSScan/2014/web/index.php>.
- Ehman, Mark A. 1977. "The Gaṇḍavyūha: Search for Enlightenment." PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Endo, Toshiichi. (1997) 2002. *Buddha in Theravada Buddhism: A Study of the Concept of Buddha in the Pali Commentaries*. Dehiwela: Buddhist Cultural Centre.
- Gómez, Luis O. 1967. "Selected Verses from the Gaṇḍavyūha: Text, Critical Apparatus and Translation." PhD diss., Yale University.
- . 1977. "The Bodhisattva as Wonder-Worker." In *Prajñāpāramitā and Related Systems: Studies in Honor of Edward Conze*, edited by Lewis R. Lancaster and Luis O. Gómez, pp. 221–62. Berkeley: University of California.
- Gross, Rita. 1993. *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- . 1997. "Some Buddhist Perspectives on the Goddess." In *Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today*, edited by Karen L. King, pp. 406–25. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

- Harrison, Paul M. 1987. "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, pp. 67–89.
- . 1990. *The Samādhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present*. Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies.
- . 2000. "Mañjuśrī and the Cult of the Celestial Bodhisattvas." *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* 13, no. 2, pp. 158–93.
- , ed. 2018. *Setting Out on the Great Way: Essays on Early Mahāyāna Buddhism*. Equinox Publishing.
- Horner, I. B. 1946. *Madhuratthavilāsini nāma Buddhavaṃsaṭṭhakathā of Bhadantācariya Buddhadatta Mahāthera*. Oxford: Pali Text Society.
- Jaini, Padmanabh S. 2001. *Collected Papers in Buddhist Studies*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Jorgensen, John, Dan Lusthaus, John Makeham, and Mark Strange, eds. and trans. 2019. *Treatise on Awakening Mahāyāna Faith*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kabilsingh, Chatsumarn. 1991. *Thai Women in Buddhism*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.
- Kajiyama Yuichi. 1982. "Women in Buddhism." *The Eastern Buddhist* 25, no. 2, pp. 53–70.
- Landesman, Susan A. 2020. *The Tārā Tantra: Tārā's Fundamental Ritual Text (Tārā-mūla-kalpa): Part 1, The Root Tantra*. New York: Wisdom Publications.
- Levering, Miriam. 1997. "Stories of Enlightened Women in Ch'an and the Chinese Buddhist Female Bodhisattva/Goddess Tradition." In *Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today*, edited by Karen L. King, pp. 137–78. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Li Tongxuan. 1989. *Entry into the Realm of Reality: The Guide; A Commentary on the Gaṇḍavyūha, the Final Book of the Avataṃsaka Sutra*, translated by Thomas Cleary. Boston: Shambhala.
- Nattier, Jan. 2000. "The Realm of Akṣobhya: A Missing Piece in the History of Pure Land Buddhism." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 23, no. 1, pp. 71–102.
- Ohnuma, Reiko. 2000. "The Story of Rāpavātī: A Female Past Birth of the Buddha." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 23, no. 1, pp. 103–45.
- Osto, Douglas. 2008. *Power, Wealth and Women in Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*. London: Routledge.
- . 2009a. "'Proto-Tantric' Elements in the Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra." *Journal of Religious History* 33, no. 2, pp. 165–77.
- . 2009b. "The Supreme Array Scripture: A New Interpretation of the Title 'Gaṇḍavyūha-Sūtra.'" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 37, no. 3, pp. 273–90.
- Paul, Diana Y. (1979) 1985. *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition*. With contributions by Frances A. Wilson. Second Edition. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Peach, Lucinda Joy. 2002. "Social Responsibility, Sex Change, and Salvation: Gender Justice in the 'Lotus Sūtra.'" *Philosophy East and West* 52, no. 1, pp. 50–74.
- Samuels, Jeffrey. 1997. "The Bodhisattva Ideal in Theravāda Buddhist Theory and Practice: A Reevaluation of the Bodhisattva-Śrāvaka Opposition." *Philosophy East and West* 47, no. 3, pp. 399–415.
- Schopen, Gregory. 2000. "The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism: Through a Chinese Looking-Glass." *The Eastern Buddhist* 32, no. 2, pp. 1–25.
- Sharma, Arvind. 1978. "Can There Be a Female Buddha in Theravada Buddhism?" *Bucknell Review: Women, Literature, Criticism* 24, no. 1, pp. 72–79.

- Shaw, Miranda Eberle. 2006. *Buddhist Goddesses of India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Skilling, Peter. 2001. "Nuns, Laywomen, Donors, Goddesses: Female Roles in Early Indian Buddhism." *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 24, no. 2, pp. 241–74.
- Sponberg, Alan. 1992. "Attitudes Toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism." In *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, edited by José Ignacio Cabezón, pp. 3–36. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Suzuki, D. T. 1968. *On Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*. Edited by Edward Conze. New York: Harper Torchbook.
- Tanabe, George J., Jr. 1992. *Myōe the Dreamkeeper: Fantasy and Knowledge in Early Kamakura Buddhism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Teiser, Stephen F., and Jacqueline I. Stone, eds. 2009. *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*. Columbia University Press.
- Tournier, Vincent. 2017. *La formation du Mahāvastu et la mise en place des conceptions relatives à la carrière du bodhisattva*. Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient.
- Vaidya, P. L., ed. 1967. *Daśabhūmikasūtram*. Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, 7. Darbhanga: Mithila Institute of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Sanskrit Learning.
- Walters, Jonathan S. 1994. "A Voice from the Silence: The Buddha's Mother's Story." *History of Religions* 33, no. 4, pp. 358–79.
- Williams, Paul. (1989) 2009. *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. Second Edition. New York: Routledge.
- Zacchetti, Stefano. 2010. "Some Remarks on the Authorship and Chronology of the Yin Chi Ru Jing Zhu 陰持入經註, The Second Phase in the Development of Early Chinese Buddhist Exegetical Literature." In *Buddhist Asia 2: Papers from the Second Conference in Buddhist Studies Held in Naples in June 2004*, edited by Giacomella Orofino and Silvio Vita, pp. 141–98. Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies.