Self-Referential Passages in Mahāyāna Sutra Literature

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This study explores self-referential passages in Mahāyāna sutra literature. It argues that these passages serve to mediate a reader or listener's approach to a text in much the same manner as paratexts mediate one's approach to a text through external or adjacent devices such as commentaries; these passages, rather than being paratextual and outside of a text, are rather within the body of the text itself. This study explicates the types of self-referential passages in Mahāyāna literature, including encouragement to practice and propagate the text; turning it into a book; preserving the text; statements regarding the text's benefits; identification of the text with other qualities or principles; the qualifications required for obtaining the text; and passages for the entrustment of the text. After noting the relative absence of such passages outside of Mahāyāna literature, it is argued that such passages reveal that for some of the adherents of the disparate early Mahāyāna, textuality was a medium of unprecedented value and utility in promoting novel texts and doctrines.

Keywords: books, Mahāyāna, Indian Buddhism, paratexts, sutras

The Mahāyāna Buddhist sutra literature includes many self-referential passages, wherein the text in question refers to itself, such as the well-known passage from the *Vajracchedikā* where it is stated that "if someone, having taken up even a four-line verse from this *dharmaparyāya*, were to teach it to others, that person would consequently produce great, immeasurable, and incalculable merit."[1] These self-referential passages, which take several forms, are not focused in

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1. Paul Harrison and Shōgō Watanabe, eds., "Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā," in *Buddhist Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection*, vol. 3, ed. Jens Braarvig (Oslo: Hermes, 2006), 124.

paratextual materials such as introductions, epilogues, commentaries, or ritual manuals as we find in other kinds of Buddhist and South Asian literature, but rather are embedded directly within the body of the text itself. Why then, in texts that purport to represent the speech of a dialogue, does the Mahāyāna literature appear to self-reference itself in an abstract manner, or even in a manner conscious of its manuscript form?

The Mahāyāna sutras were anonymously redacted, but the motivations behind the inclusion of self-referential passages may be deduced from what we know about the texts themselves and the circumstances surrounding them. After explicating the nature of these passages and providing examples of each, I shall argue that self-referential passages functioned as self-promotion strategies suited to the employment of the emerging medium of the manuscript, that this medium was one key to the success of the early Mahāyāna, and that it also shaped Mahāyāna doctrine in regards to textuality and the Mahāyāna cult of the book.

SELF-REFERENTIAL PASSAGES COMPARED TO PARATEXTS

In understanding the nature of self-referential passages as embedded within the body of a text, it helps to consider how these passages differ from materials outside of or adjacent to a text. Paratexts are what Gérard Genette called the "liminal devices"[2] that act as thresholds through which a reader enters a text. These are devices created by an author, publisher, redactor, or others[3] in and around a volume, such as titles, intertitles, dedications, notes, commentaries, and outside references to the text, which mediate a reader's approach to a text. These phenomena, for Genette, are more alienable and alterable than the text itself and "may appear at any time" and "may also disappear, definitively or not, by authorial decision or outside intervention or by virtue of the eroding effect of time."[4] It appears that self-referential passages act as paratexts in being an author or redactor's attempt to mediate the reader's opinion or approach to a text, and yet they are embedded within a text. It will thus be argued that with self-referential

2. Richard Macksey, foreword to *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, by Gérard Genette, trans. Richard Macksey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), i.

3. Genette, *Paratexts*, 10.

4. Ibid., 5.

passages being a part of the text itself, rather than being left for para-textual material such as ritual manuals, there was an attempt on the part of redactors to reduce the alienability of the instructions found within these passages. Weaving these passages into the body of the text and rendering them *buddhavacana*, or word of the Buddha, further enhances their inalienable nature in being holy words, a matter that we shall return to later.[5]

Considering paratexts in the light of self-referential passages may give rise to the consideration that the passages in question may have been paratexts at one point. Under such a view, at one time there may have been ritual manuals, for instance, which, after prolonged association and use with a text, became assimilated into the text.[6] Or it may have been the case that the practices that these passages refer to were engaged in prior to their placement in the text. Due to the way they are embedded within the flow of the discourses in question, these possibilities are unlikely, and a consideration of the nature of these passages in the context of the early Mahāyāna will remove doubts as to this. Thus, while paratexts act as thresholds through which the reader approaches the text, these self-referential passages, while mediating the reader's approach to the text, do so from within the text.

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5. While this introduction makes clear that this is not a paratextual study, as regards the applicability of a paratextual field of enquiry to non-European materials, see Genette, *Paratexts*, 37. Currently, the liveliest engagements with paratextual methodology are outside of the area of the printed European books that Genette focused on and in the field of pre-modern manuscript studies. See, for example, the field of paratext studies at the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at the University of Hamburg, whose Project Area A focuses on paratexts. Projects in the 2015–2019 phase focus on paratextuality in the areas of mediaeval Japan, Tamil manuscripts, Old Mande and Old Kanembu Islamic manuscripts, nineteenth century Malay manuscripts, Anisong manuscripts from Luang Prabang, Mediaeval Gospel manuscripts, and eighth and ninth century Islamic Ḥadīṯ manuscripts (Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, *Sub-Projects of the Second Phase 2015–2019: Project Area A: Paratexts*, Universität Hamburg, 2017, https://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/Projekte_p2_e.html#PBA, accessed December 6, 2018).
6. Something that appears to have occurred with some tantras, such as the last five chapters of the *Guhyasamāja tantra.*

A NOTE ON MAHĀYĀNA AND PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ LITERATURES

This article uses the terms Mahāyāna and Prajñāpāramitā, so a few words will be given briefly for a clarification of terms. While the Mahāyāna appears to have not been a movement with a sectarian (*nikāya*) affiliation,[7] and thus our use of the term for our present purposes is to be understood only as a generalizing heuristic, textually, there is a Mahāyāna that appears to be distinct from non-Mahāyāna in terms of doctrine and in terms of structure. Doctrinally, the Mahāyāna texts suggest higher and faster attainments than those promised in non-Mahāyāna texts but do not preclude the efficacy of the non-Mahāyāna texts and practices in helping one achieve arhatship or pratyekabuddhahood (two states of spiritual attainment considered lower than full buddhahood by all categories of Buddhist text).[8] The Mahāyāna texts also suggest a variety of doctrines held to be unsuitable to those who are unprepared, such as the matter of the status of buddhas after their attainment of nirvana. However, as shall be argued in this article, structurally, among other things, the Mahāyāna literature differs from its non-Mahāyāna counterpart in the employment of self-referential passages.

Prajñāpāramitā ("perfection of wisdom"), within the category of Mahāyāna, is itself taken by scholars and Buddhists to be a literary corpus. There is a great proliferation of texts that discuss the Prajñāpāramitā (doctrinally or ritually) and characterize themselves as being Prajñāpāramitā texts; they are often referred to as such, both in self-referential passages and in paratexts. In addition, they include many stereotyped phrases that are unique to their body of literature and are only understood in particular ways therein.[9] Moreover, from an emic perspective, Buddhists themselves sometimes have distinguished Prajñāpāramitā as a collection within Mahāyāna texts, as in the Tibetan Bka'-'gyur.[10]

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7. See, e.g., Paul Harrison, "Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna: What Are We Looking For?" *The Eastern Buddhist* 28, no. 1 (1995): 48–69, 56.

8. An argument made, for instance, by David Drewes, "Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism II: New Perspectives," *Religion Compass* 4, no. 2 (2010): 66–74, 67.

9. As studied in Edward Conze, *Materials for a Dictionary of the Prajñāpāramitā Literature* (Tokyo: Suzuki Research Foundation, 1967).

10. Jose Ignacio Cabezon and Roger R. Jackson, eds., *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* (Snow Lion Publications: Ithaca, 1996), 22.

TYPES OF SELF-REFERENTIAL PASSAGES
IN THE MAHĀYĀNA LITERATURE

Self-referential passages in the Mahāyāna sutra literature have a variety of different intended effects upon the reader, each of which can tell us something different about what kind of motivating factors influenced their inclusion. Knowing these can give us a better idea of the state of the early Mahāyāna. A brief survey of their variety will make these clear.

The most common kind of self-referential passages are those related to spreading and teaching the sutra. These are usually expressed in sequence, as part of formulaic or stereotyped sentences, and many of the terms used for these actions appear to be synonymous with one another. The subjects of these actions are either a "bodhisattva," or the "son of good family or daughter of good family," (*kulaputra*; *kuladuhitṛ*) and the objects of these actions are "this sutra," or in the case of the Prajñāpāramitā texts, "this Prajñāpāramitā."[11] There are a great variety of types of such passages, but few contain the variety as found in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*. They are usually within the meat of larger arguments referring to an idealized disciple. Rather than being direct injunctions, they can be conceived of as inclining a reader towards engaging in the actions mentioned—thus they are far from paratextual and are apparently not inserts from ritual manuals.

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11. The use of the formulaic "son of good family or daughter of good family," according to Nattier, while present in other early texts such as the *Ugraparipṛcchā* and indicating "that a woman might be a genuine Buddhist devotee," was probably a later addition. See Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path According to the Inquiry of Ugra (Ugraparipṛcchā)* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 96.

It may be that the influence of the Prajñāpāramitā texts in this regard was felt upon other Mahāyāna texts. Certainly, the doctrinal non-duality of the Prajñāpāramitā literature would appear to be more congenial to a view of equality between men and women than the monastic-like bodhisattva of iron discipline found in the *Ugraparipṛcchā*. It is worth noting that women appear to be congenial, in turn, to the Prajñāpāramitā literature in later times, such as the eleventh century, when 50 percent of illustrated manuscripts were patronized by female devotees. See Jinah Kim, *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 228.

To exhaustively provide examples from all sutras surveyed would not be necessary for the present argument. Self-referential passages that I have found in a survey of forty Sanskrit editions of Mahāyāna sutras have all fit within the categories that can be identified within this sutra, and the quantitative results of this survey, and more detailed results of the survey of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* in particular, may be published at a later date.

1. Passages That Encourage the Practice and Propagation of the Text

Passages that refer to beneficial actions that can be done concerning the text are the most common kind of self-referential passages. These beneficial actions also have boons associated with them, from the apotropaic to full buddhahood. While they are common across Mahāyāna sutra literature, in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* they appear to be structured in a gradual progression, building upon the prior set of actions, such that towards the end of the sutra these actions result in greater and greater spiritual benefit. They begin with actions such as simply taking up and learning the sutra,[12] for instance, the instruction that one who wishes to attain highest awakening "should listen, take up, bear, recite, study, and propagate just this Prajñāpāramitā."[13] Later, these passages gradually suggest instructing others and becoming a teacher oneself.[14] They also involve the worship of the text[15] and the worship of the ground on which the text is placed as a true *caitya* (*caityabhūta*) of the Buddha.[16]

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12. E.g., Unrai Wogihara, ed., *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā: The Work of Haribhadra Together with the Text Commented On* (Tokyo: Sankibō Buddhist Bookstore, 1932 [1973]), 41[19–20]; and Nalinaksa Dutt, ed., *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtram with N.D. Mironov's Readings from Central Asian Mss* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1953), 233[1–6].

13. Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*, 41[20–22]. Passages of this type occur hundreds of times in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and expand upon this formula. All primary source translations are my own.

14. E.g., Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*, 193[23–27]; Harry Falk and Seishi Karashima, eds., "A First–Century Prajñāpāramitā Manuscript from Gandhāra – Parivarta 5 (Texts from the Split Collection 2)," *Annual Report of The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* 16 (2013): 110[7–22].

15. E.g., Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*, 209[1–6].

16. E.g., ibid., 206[1]–207[6]; Harrison and Watanabe, "Vajracchedikā," 122[4–8]. See also Gregory Schopen, "The Phrase *sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet* in the

2. Turning the Text into a Book

The importance of the text as a book appears even in self-referential passages in the earliest first-century manuscripts discussed by Falk and Karashima,[17] indicating that if the text had an oral stage, its eventual textuality was conceived of as important enough to embed its status as textual within *buddhavacana* through self-reference. These passages suggest, for instance:

> By the power of the Buddha, having written [the Prajñāpāramitā] well with very distinct letters in a great book, it is to be revered, adored, honoured, worshipped, venerated, respected, with flowers, incense, fragrances, garlands, unguents, aromatic powders, robes, music, vestments, parasols, banners, bells, flags, and with rows of lamps on all sides, and with manifold *pūjās*. This is instructed in our presence, Ānanda. Why? For the perfect development of the knowledge of omniscience is here in this Prajñāpāramitā.[18]

Besides setting it up for worship, other important actions suggested include ensuring that when making the text into a book, it is done so with "very distinct letters" (*pravyaktapravyaktair akṣaraiḥ*).[19]

3. Preserving the Text

According to other self-referential passages, the ideal disciple would preserve and maintain the text and then hand it on to others who are suitable vessels for it.[20] Much of the language used in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* (and that found in Haribhadra's commentary, giving one an idea of later, eighth-century impressions of these passages) is highly indicative

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Vajracchedikā: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," in *Figments and Fragments of Mahayana Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 25–65; and David Drewes, "Revisiting the Phrase '*sa pṛthivīpradeśaś caityabhūto bhavet*' and the Mahāyāna Cult of the Book," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 50 (2007): 101–143.

17. Harry Falk and Seishi Karashima, eds., "A First–Century Prajñāpāramitā Manuscript from Gandhāra – Parivarta 5 (Texts from the Split Collection 2)," *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University* 16 (2013): 106[1–12], 108[24–32], 110[4–20], 118[6]–168[15].

18. Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*, 990[1–10].

19. E.g., ibid., 990[1–2], used in many contexts and with variations.

20. Ibid., 285[3]–287[7].

of an implication of manuscript preservation, such as the suggestion that just as for sons indebted to their mother, there should

> verily not arise for her a touch that is suffering or a feeling that is suffering, or from the eye, or from the ear, or from the nose, or from the tongue, or from the body, or from the mind, or from wind, or from bile, or from phlegm, or from falling, or from biting, or from a mosquito, or from a creeping animal, or from a human, or from a non-human, or from that which has been thrown down, or from a sudden event, or an unwished for occurrence that should befall on her body. Thus, those sons, having thoroughly offered their mother every ease and affection, would clean her, would cherish her, would protect her—"our mother is our progenitor, enduring hardship she is the giver of our life and is the teacher of the world." Just so, Subhūti, the Tathāgata, arhat, perfectly and fully awakened buddhas bring to mind this Prajñāpāramitā.[21]

Besides this particularly striking example of how a bodhisattva would protect the text as one's mother, it is also suggested that one treat the text as a cow would protect her calves.[22] Moreover, consolidating one's bond (*anubandham*) to the text also involves not only rejoicing in the text but also not forsaking those who recite and preserve it.[23]

4. Statements about the Text's Benefit

Towards those who engage in the actions suggested to be done to the text are a variety of statements about the boons that would result. These typically include protection by gods,[24] such as the suggestion by the Four Great Kings that they will "arrange for the guarding, protection, and defense of those sons of good family or daughters of good family who take up, bear, recite, study, and propagate this Prajñāpāramitā."[25] Moreover, those who do honor to the text are also said to benefit from protection from dangers, both materially[26] and in the form of those who might challenge one's teaching.[27] There is particular value given, by presenting a corresponding set of similar boons, to those who prop-

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21. Ibid., 529^4–530^{12}.

22. Ibid., 582^{1-7}.

23. Ibid., 581^9–582^7.

24. E.g., ibid., 187^{4-21}.

25. Ibid., 190^{14-22}.

26. E.g., ibid., 201^5–204^9.

27. E.g., ibid., 194^{19-25}.

agate the text[28] or those who worship it on the spot of earth that has been rendered into a *caitya*.[29] However, the most common expression of boons is in the form of comparison. For instance, the promotion or worship of the Prajñāpāramitā in the form of a book is said to be greater than the creation of offerings the size of each gradation of world size in the Buddhist cosmos (which goes on for about twenty pages in the Sanskrit)[30] or the spiritual attainment of states valued by the typical Buddhist practitioners, such as successive meditative states called *dhyānas*.[31] Even the few fragments of the first-century Prajñāpāramitā manuscript documented by Falk and Karashima show that passages of comparative boons were among the first self-referential passages employed by Mahāyāna sutra redactors.[32] One of the more famous examples of this kind of boon is the *Vajracchedikā*'s claim that teaching even four lines from the text itself would be greater merit than giving an immeasurable gift to all buddhas.[33]

5. Identification of the Text with Other Qualities or Principles

Passages of self-identification, where the text identifies itself with something of high value or of doctrinal importance, are the second most common type of self-referential passage. In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* these include identification of the text as the mother of all bodhisattvas,[34] the mother of omniscience,[35] or the midwife of knowledge.[36] It argues that since "the Prajñāpāramitā is at the fore, is the leader, is the chief, is the teacher, is the displayer, is the mother and midwife of the six *pāramitās*,"[37] the bodhisattvas should thus care for it as a mother,[38] or as a cow not abandoning her calves.[39] The text is also identified as

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28. Ibid., 205[13–21].
29. Ibid., 207[9–14].
30. Ibid., 302[4]–323[20].
31. Ibid., 290[22]–291[22].
32. Falk and Karashima, "A First–Century Prajñāpāramitā" (Texts from the Split Collection 2), 118[1]–168[14].
33. Harrison and Watanabe, "Vajracchedikā," 118[1–11].
34. Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*, 380[5–7].
35. Ibid., 379[8–23].
36. Ibid., 989[22–24].
37. Ibid., 788[15–17].
38. Ibid., 529[16]–530[5].
39. Ibid., 582[2–7].

being the "*dharmakāya*"[40] or dharma-body. In its usage within the early Mahāyāna sutras, this term appears to imply the body or corpus of *dharmas*, i.e. the Buddha's teachings, which is equated with the Buddha himself (i.e., the Buddha is his teachings).[41] Similarly, the text identifies as infinite, not bounded by the measures of a book or letters,[42] and as an isolated phenomenon, which from a Buddhist perspective would identify it with nirvana, something that does not depend upon any other conditions.[43] The text also reflexively warns about counterfeit versions of itself, which teach an incorrect doctrine.[44] It is also identified as a *vidyā*,[45] whose protective function is taken in later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna to be similar to the use of other ritual formulae such as mantras. For providing the bodhisattva with correct instruction and practice, the Prajñāpāramitā is also identified with the ideal good friend (*kalyānamitra*)[46] and the leader of the buddhas (*buddhanetri*).[47] In most other Mahāyāna sutras, we find similar passages of general self-reference. For instance, in the *Laṅkāvatāra*, Rāvaṇa, king of the *yakṣas*, sings, "I recall this sutra was recited by buddhas of the past, accompanied by the sons of the victors; may the Lord also declare it";[48] and as if a talking book in the midst of a library, the Buddha is depicted as stating, "in the *Hastikakṣya*, the *Mahāmedha*, the *Nirvāṇa*, the *Aṅgulimālika*, and in the *Laṅkāvatāra sūtra* meat is prohibited by me."[49] From the doc-

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40. Ibid., 268⁵⁻⁹.

41. Ibid., 268⁵⁻⁹.

42. Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*, 877²⁸–878⁵.

43. Ibid., 878¹⁹⁻²⁷.

44. Ibid., 298; Falk and Karashima, "A First–Century Prajñāpāramitā" (Texts from the Split Collection 2), 112¹–116⁴.

45. Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*, 234⁴⁻⁸. On this topic see Todd T. Lewis, "Refuge and Recitation: The *Pañcarakṣā*," in *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and Rituals of Newar Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); and David Gordon White, "Tantra," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, ed. Knut A. Jacobsen, Helene Basu, Angelika Malinar, and Vasudha Narayanan (Brill Online, 2012, accessed 26 July, 2017: http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/entries/brill-s-encyclopedia-of-hinduism/tantra-BEHCOM_9000000067).

46. Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*, 785⁴⁻²⁰.

47. Ibid., 250¹³⁻¹⁸, and elsewhere.

48. Nanjio Bunyiu, ed., *The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (Kyoto: Otani University Press, 1923), 5⁷⁻⁸.

49. Ibid.*,* 258⁴⁻⁵.

trinal perspective, self-referential passages related to actions towards the sutra and the sutra's benefits stem from the status of the text as an ultimate principle, which at once is present in the world and goes beyond it—thus allowing both apotropaic and transcendental boons without contradiction.

6. Statements about the Qualifications Required for Obtaining or Hearing the Text

Passages which refer to the roots (*mūla*), or prior qualifications, possessed by someone who comes to hear or encounter the text, while referring to the idealized disciple, certainly can be taken as referring directly to the reader of the text, since they are encountering the text just as the disciple is described as doing. For example, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* states that those who encounter the Prajñāpāramitā are those who "have done service under previous buddhas,"[50] whose "wholesome roots have been planted by many buddhas,"[51] who are already bodhisattvas "set out on the path for long," and who are "to be known as one whose wholesome roots are thoroughly ripe."[52] Moreover, the Buddha tells Ānanda that with the roots of merit required to practice the Prajñāpāramitā for even a single instant, "it is impossible and out of the question that the bodhisattva *mahāsattva* supplied with those wholesome roots should backslide from highest and perfect full awakening: it should be known that such is not possible."[53] Self-referential passages of this sort serve to address the reader or listener on a personal level in order to affect their perception and evaluation of themself in relation to the text. The fact that the text states that one who encounters a hearing of the Prajñāpāramitā is already endowed with extremely good roots, and may even be an irreversible bodhisattva, certainly is inclined to give the reader a sense of fulfilled destiny, further encouraging them to complete what they have been told they have hitherto worked towards, at risk of forsaking that inheritance.

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50. Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*, 459[4–8].
51. Ibid., 459[24].
52. Ibid., 468[21–26].
53. Seishi Karashima, "On the 'Missing' Portion in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*," *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology* 16 (March 2013): 191[30–33].

7. Entrustments of the Text

Passages of entrustment (*parīndanā*) of the text to a disciple, such as the Buddha's attendant Ānanda, are also essentially self-referential. For instance, in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the Buddha suggests that the text be "assembled in high degree in letters, so that being taken up, borne, recited, studied, and propagated, it might last for a long time, and shall not disappear."[54] If Ānanda were to trespass against this advice, he is told that he would be trespassing against the Buddha.[55] Moreover, after advising engaging in some of the beneficial actions of the first type discussed, the Buddha suggests that being devoted to the sutra is being devoted to him.[56] This type of self-referential passage underscores the perplexing nature of these passages in which the text is claiming to entrust itself, *within* itself. While such could have been added on as an epilogue, inserting this into the body of the text, a few chapters from the end, changes the character of the passages considerably. As an epilogue, the passages would be referring to that which is external, whereas as a self-referential passage they are referring to themselves as part of the textual whole. While *parīndanā* are not necessarily out of the realm of possibility in an oral context, they make a lot more sense in a written context, where there is actually an object which one can worship, pass on, and copy as instructed—it is worth noting in this case that the second *parīndanā* in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is explicit about being transmitted in written form.[57]

THE SCOPE OF SELF-REFERENTIALITY

While most Mahāyāna sutras feature self-referential passages, there are also some that either have very few or none. For instance, besides epilogues, there is very little that can be considered self-referential in

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54. Wogihara, *Abhisamayālaṃkār'ālokā Prajñāpāramitāvyākhyā*, 869[11–14].

55. Ibid., 869[14–17].

56. Ibid., 870[15–28].

57. Ibid., 990[1–7].

the Pure Land sutras, such as the shorter[58] and longer[59] *Sukhāvatīvyūha* sūtras, and the *Amitāyurdhyāna sūtra*.[60]

To use a dramaturgical turn of phrase, in employing self-referentiality, Mahāyāna sutras "break the fourth wall" of the situation they are attempting to represent. They do this by engaging in self-reference in the midst of the text and disrupting the pretense of being the representation of a discourse. The closest to this kind of passage that is found in non-Mahāyāna sutras and suttas are (a) references to a subsection of the text that is intended for recitation, (b) references to other discourses (which also makes sense from the narrative [or dramatic] perspective, with the text usually representing itself as a depiction of a discourse in a way that the Mahāyāna self-referential passages do not), or are (c) epilogues, which are essentially paratextual:

(a) For instance, as regards reference to a subsection, the *Saṅgīti sutta* contains a list of things proclaimed by the Buddha, regarding which the sutta depicts the Buddha as saying, "it is to be recited by all."[61]

(b) As an example of references to other discourses, the *Soṇa sutta* depicts the monk Soṇa Kuṭikaṇṇa visiting the Buddha and reciting the entire *Aṭṭhakavagga*, a chapter of the *Suttanipāta*.[62] While it is doubtable that a recitation infrastructure of the kind suggested by this passage could have been in existence at the time of the Buddha, wherein subsections of collections of discourses have been differentiated, this nonetheless would be a plausible, if unlikely, situation.

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58. F. Max Müller and Bunyiu Nanjio, eds., annotated by Unrai Wogihara, "(梵和対訳阿弥陀経) The Smaller Sukhâvatîvyûha," in 浄土宗全書 (*Jodōshū Zensho*) 23 (Tokyo: Sankibō Buddhist Bookstore, 1972), 193–212.

59. Atsuuji Ashikaga, ed., *Sukhāvatīvyūha* (Hōzōkan: Kyoto, 1965).

60. They tend to also be absent in later Vajrayāna texts, such as *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṅgraha, Guhyasamāja tantra, Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi sūtra, Advayasiddhi, Śrīherukābhidhānaṃ Cakrasaṃvara tantra*, and the *Mañjuśriyamūlakalpa*. But they are present in, for instance, the Pañcarakṣā texts. The full survey of the presence of self-referential passages may be published elsewhere.

61. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, eds., *Dīgha-Nikāya*, vol. 3 (London: Pali Text Society, 1911), 243[8–9].

62. Paul Steinthal, ed., *Udāna* (London: Pali Text Society, 1885), 59[21–28]. Soṇa's recitation is also related in Hermann Oldenberg, ed., *Vinayapiṭaka: Vol. I Mahāvagga* (London: Pali Text Society, 1879), 196[34–38], 198[28].

(c) Finally, as for a typical epilogue which, functioning paratextually, is not truly self-referential, the *Madhupiṇḍika sutta* concludes with the Buddha telling Ānanda that he "should remember this Dhamma teaching by the name of the '*Madhupiṇḍika sutta*.'"[63] The only anomalous case I have found, which appears to be genuinely self-referential, is that of the monk Piṅgiya proclaiming in the *Pārāyanavagga* of the *Suttanipāta* that "I shall recite the '*pārāyana*.'"[64] Here, by *pārāyana*, it seems clear that he is referring to the *vagga* within which he is depicted. Nonetheless, this kind of self-reference is of a wholly different character than the Mahāyāna sutras, where self-promotion of the text within the text appears to be the primary mode of operation. This is what makes self-referential passages similar in function to paratexts and why the type of epilogue found in the *Madhupiṇḍika sutta* is not of the same character.

Conventions such as types of meter are pan-South Asian. However, self-referential passages are not apparent in non-Buddhist South Asian literature. Nevertheless, close cases, like the paratextual case of epilogues in the Pāli Buddhist literature, can be found. A typical case would be the paratextual preface to the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, which reads, "Having saluted Viṣṇu, lord of all, and having saluted Brahmā and so forth; having saluted the teacher, I shall narrate a Purāṇa equal to the Vedas."[65] That this is expressed in a framing narrative in the future tense makes this a clear example of a paratext.

WHY SELF-REFERENTIALITY FOR THE MAHĀYĀNA?

Self-referential passages in the Mahāyāna literature appear to act to promote the status of the text and its preservation and propagation[66]— these three elements are also inseparable and come with one another. These are attempts to extend a text's utility and lifetime. They are

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63. V. Trenckner, ed., *Majjhima-Nikāya*, Vol. 1 (London: Pali Text Society, 1888), 114[15–16].

64. Dines Anderson and Helmer Smith, eds., *Suttanipāta* (London: Pali Text Society, 1913), 219[15].

65. M. M. Pathak and Peter Schreiner, eds., *The Critical Edition of the Viṣṇupurāṇam*, Vol. 1 (Vadodara: Oriental Institute, 1997), 1, 1.0*2.

66. Self-referentiality as a means of self-promotion was previously suggested by Florinda De Simini, *Of Gods and Books: Ritual and Knowledge Transmission in the Manuscript Cultures of Premodern India* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 2–4.

tools and devices hardwired into the sutra for helping to curate and care for the text. The extent and quantity of these devices is a testament to the importance intended to be perceived in the text. While what may appear to be doctrinal content is dwarfed by such devices, as in the *Aparamitāyuḥ*, which is almost entirely self-referential, it should be emphasized that these devices come to be constitutive of Mahāyāna doctrine, as it is argued the Mahāyāna sutra texts themselves are constitutive of the Buddha's true body. It can be surmised that the redactors felt that such matters were so crucial to the text, which is regarded as *buddhavacana*, that they were made integral to it. Paratexts, on the other hand, such as separate notes or colophons, let alone commentaries, cannot be reliably be attached to a sutra in an integral manner, may have greater variety of opinion, and are likely to have been seen as having lesser value than *buddhavacana*. These characterize the relative alienability and alterability of paratexts when compared to texts, as suggested by Genette.[67] Thus, the safest approach for the redactors of the Mahāyāna literature was to weave such injunctions into the text itself.

As regards the presence of textuality in the first place, it seems clear that for the early Mahāyāna, the text as book was an alternative to reliance upon the older tradition of sutra *bhāṇakas*. While the causes for the rise of the Mahāyāna will not be explored here, the reliance upon textuality as a reason for the rise of the Mahāyāna and the survival of the Mahāyāna were previously suggested by Harrison and Gombrich, respectively.[68] Underscoring, however, the lack of any uniformity in the early Mahāyāna is the presence of Mahāyāna sutras that do not discuss books or writing—what was thus true for some of the Mahāyāna texts and groups would not have held true for all of them.

Moreover, Drewes has argued that in contrast to the older tradition of sutra *bhāṇakas*, who had transmission lines for specific texts or collections of texts (e.g., *dīghabhāṇakas* as transmitters of the *Dīghanikāya*), the Mahāyāna textual composition, transmission, and teaching appears to have been done by individuals referred to as the

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67. Genette, *Paratexts*, 5
68. Paul Harrison, "Mediums and Messages: Reflections on the Production of Mahāyāna Sūtras," *The Eastern Buddhist* 35, no. 1 (2003): 115–151; Richard Gombrich, "How the Mahāyāna Began," *Journal of Pali and Buddhist Studies* 1 (1988): 29–46.

dharmabhāṇakas in the Mahāyāna literature.[69] While the use of the book may not have been an absolute "either/or" situation for these *dharmabhāṇakas* who may have had a few options open to them for propagation of new materials, it appears to have been the best option. At some point after the Mahāyāna's emergence, it became clear to the *dharmabhāṇakas* that, being outsiders to an established and powerful recitation infrastructure, the text was the most important tool for the curation and propagation of doctrine.[70] Self-referentiality became essential to ensuring the prosperity and respect of this new tool. The use of written text thus allowed the promoters of innovative doctrines the ability to preserve and perpetuate that which previously would have only been possible with the support of sutra *bhāṇakas* who preached centered around *caityas*—the new *caitya* thus could become the text. While the Mahāyāna does not repudiate worship centered around *caityas*, its sutras proclaim without reservations the superiority of the worship of the written text, as well as its reproduction and maintenance. As the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* says, "The Dharma-pūjā taught by the Tathāgata, son of good family, is that of the sutras."[71]

Another matter to consider is the creation of the cult of the book. With the text as the central object of worship, developing a cult centered on the text makes sense—especially if it is taking the place of a *stūpa* containing relics. The employment of ritual formulae to gain the support of *nāgas* or cure snakebites is found in Pāli literature and appears to have always had a role in Buddhist practice. With the attribution of apotropaic qualities to the recitation of the text or parts of the text, its identification, too, with mantras, *dhāraṇīs*, or *vidyās* should not come as a surprise. The Pañcarakṣā texts further see the personification of the texts in the forms of goddesses and *dhāraṇīs*. That the

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69. David Drewes, "Dharmabhāṇakas in Early Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 54 (2011): 331–372.

70. Norman also notes, making a similar argument, that after the rise of Mahāyāna textuality, non-Mahāyāna textual traditions could no longer "point to a long *bhāṇaka* tradition of the texts, which alone, before the use of writing, could prove that they were *buddhavacana*" (Norman, K.R., *A Philological Approach to Buddhism* [Tring: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1997], 93).

71. Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, eds., *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: Transliterated Sanskrit Text Collated with Tibetan and Chinese Translations* (Tokyo: The Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism, Taisho University, 2004), 73ᵃ⁷.

Prajñāpāramitā eventually could be seen personified as a goddess is not unusual, especially considering the variety of passages of female self-identification contained within its pages. While most Mahāyāna texts do not become deified as goddesses in this way and yet are still subject to worship, the *Mañjuśriyamūlakalpa* expresses a consciousness of this conflation:

> Other bodhisattva *mahāsattvas* bear the female form, abiding for all beings, not withdrawing from the world for the sake of endless practice; to establish them in the irreversible path they bear the forms of various verses of *vidyās*, mantras, *dhāraṇīs* and medicinal herbs....[72]

However, rather than the bodhisattvas (as persons) becoming the texts, this paper suggests that, through self-referential passages, the texts became the bodhisattvas or buddhas.

Self-referential passages allowed the Mahāyāna literature to be promoted in the textual medium. In doing this its authors appear to have seen a clear advantage in viewing the medium as the message: in identifying the medium with the ultimate principles of the Mahāyāna doctrine, it makes unquestionable the fact that that medium should be preserved and propagated. The *dharmakāya*, or body of the dharma as text, carrying an argument about the nature of the phenomenal world, became that which is the goal of the path: which, in the case of the Mahāyāna, is buddhahood.

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72. M. M. T. Ganapati Shastri, ed., *Mañjuśrīyamūlakalpa* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1989), 9⁹⁻¹¹. On the spelling of the title of this text, see Martin Delhey, "The Textual Sources of the *Mañjuśriyamūlakalpa* (*Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*), with Special Reference to Its Early Nepalese Witness NGMPP A39/4," *Journal of the Nepal Research Centre* 14 (2012): 70–71.