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Dr Jérôme Ducor, IABS Treasurer
Dept of Oriental Languages and Cultures
Anthropole
University of Lausanne
CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland
email: iabs.treasurer@unil.ch
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**Immortal Buddhas and
their indestructible embodiments**
The advent of the concept of *vajrakāya*¹

Michael Radich

Nevermore shall I return;
Escape these caves of ice –
For I have dined on honeydew,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.²

Introduction

An important ideal of *amata* (Skt. *amṛta*, cf. “ambrosia,” “immortal” etc.; “the undying,” “the deathless”) is broadly distributed through the Pāli canon. I have argued elsewhere³ that the characterisation of the Buddhist goal as *amata* is related to a number of other senses in which early Buddhism asserts dominion over death.⁴

¹ This paper is a revision of Radich 2007: Ch. 5.1. I am very grateful to Prof. Jan Nattier, who generously commented on an earlier draft; to an anonymous reviewer for JIABS, who suggested several improvements; to Stephen Hodge for comments, permission to cite unpublished ideas, and access to digitised texts of the MPNMS; and to Prof. Shimoda Masahiro for permission to see and cite unpublished work. I also thank Profs. Saitō Akira and Chuck Muller for an invitation to present this work at Tokyo University in December 2009, when I benefitted from their comments and advice from Prof. Matsumura Junko. Remaining errors are of course my responsibility.

² Rush (Geddy Lee, Alex Lifeson, Neil Peart), “Xanadu,” from *A Farewell to Kings* (Mercury/Polygram 1977); after Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Kubla Khan” (1816).

³ Radich 2007: Ch. 2.2.

⁴ These include the conquest of Māra (“the killer,” from Skt. *mṛ*);

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Here, I study doctrines that can be taken as later developments on that ground. These doctrines eventually propose that the Buddha is completely immortal, and that his immortality is reflected in his embodiment in an utterly indestructible substance (Skt. *vajra*, Ch. *jin'gang* 金剛, “adamant”).⁵ I will argue that these ideas are an important part of the development of a broader range of ideas about the Buddha’s special embodiments – the corporeal concomitants of his liberated state. In scholarship to date, however, the emergence of the idea of the immortal Buddha embodied in adamant has been somewhat neglected, in favour of attention to (sometimes related) ideas like *dharmakāya*, *rūpakāya* and classic Yogācāra “three bod-

building Buddhist institutions on funerary sites; the incorporation of funerary symbolism in narratives of the Buddha’s awakening; accomplished Buddhist personages claiming powers of dominion over spirits of the dead; and (possibly) the use of quenched fire as a symbol for the liberated state. On *amṛtalamata*, see von Thieme 1968; Gonda 1965; Olivelle 1997; Nakaso 1981: 45–51; Rhys Davids 1938–1939; Kumoi 1955; Nishi 1969; Vetter 1988 1995; Kim 1994; Fujita 1988a 1988b 1988c. On Māra, see Boyd 1975. On other aspects of the Buddhist conquest of death, see DeCaroli 2004. On the trope of the quenched fire, see Thanissaro 1993.

⁵ According to Monier Williams, *vajra* means both “diamond (thought to be as hard as the thunderbolt or of the same substance with it)” and also, as an adjective, “adamantine, hard, impenetrable;” Monier-Williams, s.v. *vajra*. The existence of locutions like “a body like *vajra*” (身如金剛 etc.), in addition to the compound **vajrakāya*, suggests strongly that even in the compound, *vajra* must be construed as a noun. For this reason I have eschewed the adjectival “adamantine.” I have also rejected “diamond,” which is favoured by some English translators of Buddhist texts. The OED explains “adamant:” “Name of an alleged rock or mineral, as to which vague, contradictory, and fabulous notions long prevailed. The properties ascribed to it show a confusion of ideas between the diamond (or other hard gems) and the loadstone or magnet ... [after the 17th century,] the word was ... often used by scientific writers as a synonym of ‘diamond.’ In modern use it is only a poetical or rhetorical name for the embodiment of surpassing hardness; that which is impregnable to any application of force.” These symbolic associations, and the specialisation for the fabulous, render it a more apt translation than “diamond.” Finally, since the distinction is key, I have adopted the somewhat artificial convention of regularly translating “body like adamant” for phrases that include an element that makes the simile explicit (as in 身如金剛 etc.), but “adamant body,” “body of adamant” etc. for the compound *vajrakāya*/金剛身 etc., where the element of explicit comparison is absent.

ies” (*trikāya*) doctrine.

This study will first sketch some background to these concepts. It will then trace the emergence of the idea that the Buddha of the present world and age, Śākyamuni, is immortal, a development which falls into three rough phases. We will then look at two broad phases in the emergence of the idea that the Buddha’s body is adamant, spanning the same rough period in which the idea of the Buddha’s immortality emerges. In closing, I will consider some of the implications of the history I trace here for the broader history of ideas about bodies of the Buddha.

The following study is based primarily on the Chinese canon, with a focus on determining approximately when each relevant idea first appears in the Chinese textual record.⁶ There are some obvious potential pitfalls in using the Chinese translation record to date ideas in Buddhist history at large. It is clear that many texts were translated centuries after they were first written, and we must not confuse the happenstance order of translation of ideas into Chinese with the order of their original genesis and development. However, the argument below is based upon a sudden proliferation in the Chinese record of instances of certain new ideas in key periods, especially around 400 C.E. These ideas are difficult to find before a certain point, but then suddenly seem to be everywhere. I believe this is a phenomenon worth observing, and such cases, in which ideas appear in sudden waves, may provide us with an effective way of using the Chinese canon for the study of the history of Buddhist ideas.⁷

⁶ Even within that material, I aim to be representative, not exhaustive. Even with powerful digital search tools, the sheer quantity of text made exhaustive study of all texts prior to 400 impossible. Because of this selective treatment, I can in no case claim to have found *the* earliest instance of a concept, though each concept must be *at least* as early as my earliest instance of it. However, I did search thoroughly, and in particular, paid attention to a large selection of texts by Lokakṣema, Zhi Qian and Dharmarakṣa, and also Moksala’s *Pañca* T221.

⁷ The idea for such a method was stimulated by an unpublished talk given by Jan Nattier for the Harvard University Buddhist Studies Forum, October 28 2002. I am grateful to Professor Nattier for permission to cite this unpublished work.

Background

We turn first to the background for the developments studied here. Texts from the late Pāli-canonical period and onwards take up and modify the theme of exemption from death (*amata*, “the deathless” etc.) and related ideas. The Buddha, and other beings who master the *ṛddhipāda* (supernormal powers), are said to be able to control their lifespan at will. This idea appears already in certain Pāli canonical texts, and may be traced further into Abhidharma discourse and early Mahāyāna materials.

Pāli canonical antecedents

In the Pāli canon, cosmological theories hold that lifespans are much longer elsewhere in the cosmos (i.e. outside Jambudvīpa). Long lifespan is particularly ascribed to various gods.⁸ Lifespan is also very long in the Paduma and other hells.⁹ It is in these connections that we first find the use of elaborate conceits to convey the idea of enormous spans of time.¹⁰ These conceits perhaps form a remote antecedent for the ideas we see below in texts like the *Sukhāvātīvyūha*.

Lifespan can also be much longer for humans, at times remote from us in the cosmological cycle.¹¹ This tradition is found most fre-

⁸ Long lifespan is ascribed to the gods of the Thirty-Three in the *Pāyāsi-sutta*; DN 2:327, Maurice Walshe 1995: 355; to various gods, AN 1:213–214, Woodward and Hare 1995: 1:193–194; to *devas* of various spheres in realms attained in the next rebirth by masters of various kinds of meditation, AN 1:266–267, “The Sphere of Infinite Space,” Woodward and Hare 1:245–246; again at AN 2:126–127, (where the lifespan is measured in *kalpas*), Woodward and Hare 2:130–131; so too at AN 4:252, Woodward and Hare 4:172–173.

⁹ SN 1:328–329, “Kokālika,” Bodhi 2000: 246; repeated at AN 5:173, Woodward and Hare 1995: 5:116.

¹⁰ Such as the idea that a night and day would equate to a hundred years in our world, or analogies like, “If a man were to take one mustard seed away from a whole cartload every hundred years ...” etc. When I was at Catholic primary school, the nuns of St Joseph used very similar figures to impress upon us the length of eternity in hell.

¹¹ For example, the *Cakkavattisīhanāda-sutta* relates tales about former

quently in connection with the ages of past Buddhas: from 80,000 years for Vipāśyin to 20,000 years for Kāśyapa.¹² These texts say that the lifespan of *all* people was longer in the time of these former Buddhas, not just the lifespan of Buddhas themselves.¹³ However, over time focus may have concentrated on the extraordinary length of the lifespan of the Buddhas in particular.

The Pāli canon also contains the idea that the Buddha has voluntary control over his earthly lifespan, and could, if he so chose, live an extraordinarily long time. (In theory this power is available to any master of the supernormal powers resulting from meditation, i.e. the *iddhipādas/ṛddhipādas*.) The *locus classicus* for this claim is the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, where the Buddha tells Ānanda that anyone who has mastered the four *iddhipāda* and is secure in their mastery “could undoubtedly live for a *kalpa* or more than a *kalpa*.”¹⁴ The *Cakkavattisīhanāda-sutta* also asserts that not only the Buddha but also any “monk [who] develops the road to power which is concentration of intention accompanied by effort of will” etc. “can, if he wishes, live for a full *kalpa*, or more than a *kalpa*.”¹⁵

ages in which lifespans were 80,000 years, 40,000 years, 20,000 years etc., and predicts that in future the cycle will be reversed; DN 3:58–79, Walshe 1995: 395–405.

¹² I am grateful to Jan Nattier for drawing my attention to this connection (personal communication). See also Nattier 1991: 19–20.

¹³ See DN 14, *Mahāpadāna-sutta*, which mentions the lifespan of Vipassī and people in his age in particular several times: DN 2:4, Walshe 1995: 200; DN 2:11, Walshe 202; DN 2:50, Walshe 219, etc. Some of these past Buddhas, and their lifespans, are also mentioned in “Mount Vepulla,” and this passage confirms that all beings, and not just the Buddhas, of the past, were very long-lived; SN 2:191, Bodhi 2000: 659–660. AN 4:136ff. relates a tale about a former teacher called “Wheelwright,” in whose age people lived 60,000 years, Woodward and Hare 1995: 4:91–94.

¹⁴ *kappaṃ vā tiṭṭheyya kappāvasesaṃ vā*: DN 2:103, Walshe 1995: 246, translation modified. This claim is repeated three times, but Ānanda fails to take the hint. A little later in the text, when Ānanda finally asks the Buddha to remain, the assertion is repeated a further three times; DN 2:114–118, Walshe 251–252. The formula also occurs at a number of other loci: “The Shrine,” SN 5:258–263, Bodhi 2000: 1723–1725; AN 4:308–309, *Bhūmicāla-sutta*, Woodward and Hare 1995: 4:206; Masefield 1997: 120.

¹⁵ DN 3:77, Walshe 1995: 404–405, translation modified.

A closely associated idea is that the Buddha has the power to decide at will when he will die. In the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, the Buddha is sick but decides to “hold this disease in check by energy and apply [him]self to the force of life.”¹⁶ This claim is also found in a few other related texts.¹⁷ The two powers of prolonging life or dying at will were later (e.g. in Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma) paired as “the power(s) to prolong or abandon life” (*āyurutsargā-dhiṣṭhānavaśitva*).¹⁸

Another related doctrine is found in the *Lakkhaṇa-sutta*. The marks (*mahāpurisalakkhaṇa*) of projecting heels, long fingers and toes, and a divinely straight body are allegorically interpreted as related to untroubled long life, and to the claim that it is impossible for the Buddha to be killed.¹⁹ The implication seems to be that the Buddha could only die when he chose to give up his life, since nothing else can force him to relinquish it.

Similar ideas about the Buddha’s voluntary control over lifespan lived on in the period after the Pāli canon: for instance, pos-

¹⁶ *atha kho bhagavato etadahosi ... yannūnāhaṃ imaṃ ābādhaṃ viriyena paṭippanāmetvā jīvitasāṅkhāraṃ adhiṭṭhāya vihareyya ’nti*: DN 2:99, Walshe 1995: 244; Rhys Davids translates that the Buddha decides “by a strong effort of the will” to “bend this sickness down again, and keep hold on my life till the allotted time should come;” Rhys Davids 1995: 2:106.

¹⁷ SN 5:152–154 tells the same story, Bodhi 2000: 1636–1637; the same claim is repeated in other texts related to DN 16. See also Masefield 1997: 124.

¹⁸ E.g. at *Bhāṣya* (Bh) to *Abhidharmakośa* (AK) 7.34, La Vallée Poussin 1980: 5:83.

¹⁹ In keeping with the formula whereby the text lays out not just the merit in prior existences that led to the acquisition of the marks, but also the benefit that derives therefrom, we are told, “He [the Tathāgata in prior existences as a ruler] is long-lived, long-enduring, attaining a great age, *and during that time, no human foe can possibly take his life ... As a Buddha ... He is long-lived [etc.]; no foe, whether an ascetic or Brahmin, a deva, māra or Brahmā, or anyone in the world can possibly take his life;*” DN 3:150, Walshe 1995: 445.

sibly in reliquary inscriptions;²⁰ in the *Upagupta Avadāna*;²¹ the **Ekottarikāgama*;²² Mahāsāṃghika doctrine as reported by Vasumitra;²³ and in Vaibhāṣika scholasticism.²⁴

Actual very long or eternal life

In a broad range of early Mahāyāna texts, the Buddha's (or a Buddha's) *potential* ability to live very long is parlayed into actuality.²⁵ However, the idea of the Buddha's literal and absolute immortality seems to emerge by stages. La Vallée Poussin pointed out long ago that ideas about the unusual lifespan of the Buddha can be divided into two types. On one theory, the Buddha will live for an inordinately long time, but will still eventually enter *parinirvāṇa*. On the other theory, the Buddha remains in the world literally for all eternity.²⁶ These two types are not necessarily coeval, but may rather represent two successive phases in a historical development. We must therefore be careful to distinguish between: (1) extreme lon-

²⁰ Around the turn of the Common Era, the "Inscription of Senavarma of Oḍi" predicates undying (*amuda*) of *relics*. See Radich 2007: n. 1174. See also below, p. 249.

²¹ Cited in La Vallée Poussin 1928–1929: 803.

²² The Buddha and Śāriputra converse about the fact that the lifespan of the Buddha is beyond the ken of ordinary beings, and that it would in fact be possible for him, if he so chose, to live for a *kalpa*. Cited in La Vallée Poussin 1980: 5:83 n.3.

²³ In the *Samayabhedoparacanacakra*, Vasumitra attributes to the Mahāsāṃghikas specifically the doctrine that one who commands the four *ṛddhipādas* can live for a *kalpa* or more. La Vallée Poussin 1928–1929: 806–807.

²⁴ The Buddha has "mastery over the abandonment or maintenance of life" (*āyuṣa utsarge 'dhiṣṭhāne ca vaśitvasaṃpad*); La Vallée Poussin 1928–1929: 803; referring to AKBh to 7.34, La Vallée Poussin 1980: 5:83; AK 2.10a and Bh, La Vallée Poussin 1980: 1:120–121.

²⁵ The doctrine of the Buddha's extreme longevity, and many of the texts I discuss here, are treated in connection with the embodiments of the Buddha in Guang 2005: 119–124.

²⁶ La Vallée Poussin 1928–1929: 804–808. I am grateful to Professor Nattier for encouraging me to pursue this distinction more carefully (personal communication).

gevity; and (2) strict immortality. Further, I will argue that we also need to distinguish between the longevity or immortality of cosmically remote Buddhas, and the same ideas applied to Śākyamuni, the Buddha of this world system.

Using these criteria, the ideas studied here develop in three rough phases. (1) We first see only extreme longevity, attributed only to Buddhas cosmically remote from us (with one possible significant exception). (2) Around the time of Dharmarakṣa, Buddhas in general are exempt from *parinirvāṇa*, i.e. strictly immortal. (3) Finally, beginning with Dharmarakṣa's translation of the *Lotus*, the idea of the actual immortality of Śākyamuni appears and becomes common. We will turn first to the earliest phase, in which extreme longevity is attributed to cosmically remote Buddhas.

Nattier discerns in the earliest (proto-)“Pure Land”²⁷ literature a phase of development in which the lifespans of Buddhas may be extremely long, but the stereotyped career of a Buddha still nonetheless includes an eventual *parinirvāṇa*. The Buddha thus eventually “steps aside” and makes room for an heir or heirs. This is the case, for example, in the career of Akṣobhya Buddha as represented in the *Akṣobhyavyūha-sūtra*.²⁸ Akṣobhya eventually enters into *parinirvāṇa*, an event which is described in considerable detail.²⁹ Extremely long life for cosmically remote Buddhas may thus be an earlier development than absolute immortality.³⁰

This same logic also seems to be partly in evidence in the two

²⁷ On the term “Pure Land” in application to Indic phenomena, see Nattier 2000: 73–74 and n. 6.

²⁸ Extant in translations by Lokakṣema (T313) and Bodhiruci (T310(6)) and a Tibetan translation; for details see Nattier 2000: 76 n. 11. For other texts that also mention Akṣobhya and his world, see 77–79. Nattier has persuasively pointed to this material as a “missing link” in the development of the Pure Land ideal; Nattier 2003: 186.

²⁹ Nattier 2000: 85; T313 11.760b24–c08, 761a12–b15; cf. the translation from the Bodhiruci version in Chang 1983: 330–332. In Akṣobhya's land the ultimate death (*parinirvāṇa*) of his disciples is also a regular event; Nattier 2000: 83, T313 11.757c25–758a06.

³⁰ Nattier identifies the *Akṣobhyavyūha* as representing an earlier phase of Pure Land thought than the *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha*.

earliest versions of the Larger *Sukhāvativyūha*.³¹ Some Buddhas – at least Amitābha and his successor, the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara – still follow the pattern established by the career of Śākyamuni and ultimately enter into *parinirvāṇa*.³² This implies that the lifespan of a Buddha is inconceivably long but not infinite.

However, the close of a passage cited by Nattier seems to indicate clearly that the last Buddha in this chain, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, in fact does *not* enter *parinirvāṇa*:

Like Amitābha Buddha, [Mahāsthāmaprāpta] will remain for an infinite number of *kalpas*, [but he will] still nevermore enter *parinirvāṇa* (尚³³復不般泥洹); rather, he will continue on, teaching the way of the scriptures with great clarity, his land exceedingly good. In this same manner, his Dharma will thus be forever without end and illimitable.³⁴

It seems, then, that the chain of Buddhas will stop with Avalokiteśvara's successor, Mahāsthāmaprāpta, *who will not enter parinirvāṇa, but will endure forever*. Thus, already in Lokakṣema, we

³¹ The two *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra* (the “long” and the “short”) each exists in a number of Chinese versions, most of them too late for our purposes. Following Paul Harrison, I will regard the translation traditionally attributed to Zhi Qian (T362) as in fact by Lokakṣema and therefore the earliest, while conversely treating the closely related version attributed to Lokakṣema (T361) as actually a revision of T362 by Zhi Qian, and therefore the next earliest version of the text. See Nattier 2006: 186 and n. 9, citing Harrison, Hartmann and Matsuda 2002: 179, 180–181; Harrison 1998: 556–557, 568 n. 16, 17; see also Nattier 2003: 189–190, and n. 29. Standard scholarly opinion on the authorship of this text prior to Harrison is summarized by Gómez, following Fujita Kōtatsu; Gómez 1996: 130, 244 n. 3. We will consider two early fifth-century translations below. I will exclude entirely from consideration as too late: T367, by Xuanzang; the *Mahāratnakūṭa* version, T310(5) 10.91c05ff., translated by (the Tang) Bodhiruci 菩提流志 (active 693–713); T363, attributed to Faxian 法賢 (*Dharmabhadra?, fl. 987); and T364, a compilation of prior translations edited by Wang Rixiu 王日休 (?–1173) of Longshu 龍舒 in 1160–1162.

³² Nattier 2003: 191 and n. 32. In Lokakṣema, T362 12.309a12–24. For Zhi Qian, see T361 12.291a03–13.

³³ Var. 常, “forever,” “eternally” in Zhi Qian (where variant in the Ming text however also gives 當 “will”).

³⁴ T362 12.309a22–24; almost identical in Zhi Qian.

have a hint that absolute immortality is the property of at least one Buddha. That Buddha, however, is at a double remove from us – spatially remote, in the distant world of Amitābha; and temporally remote, since he will only exist in the very distant future.³⁵

The temporal distance between our own world and an immortal Buddha seems to be closed in what Nattier identifies as the next stage of the development of the *Sukhāvativyūha* literature.³⁶ Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta are relegated to vestigial roles, with all mention of them inheriting Amitābha’s position excised; all reference to Amitābha’s death (*parinirvāṇa*) also disappears.³⁷ Thus, it is possible for a Buddha (Amitābha) to be immortal in the present, so long as he is spatially remote.³⁸

It is already difficult to distinguish between the extreme hyperbolically long lifespans of Buddhas in these texts and utter immortality, except in a very abstract sense.³⁹ For example:

³⁵ Nattier has apparently overlooked this claim about Mahāsthāmaprāpta. She understands that even in the later versions of this literature, “the idea that all living beings – including all living Buddhas – must eventually pass away, however distant that date may be, is left in place;” Nattier 2003: 192.

³⁶ The most popular version of the “long *sūtra*,” T360, attributed to Saṃghavarman, which would date to 252 if that attribution were correct. However, “modern scholarship has now questioned that attribution. It now seems more likely that the so-called Saṃghavarman translation is at least a reworking by members of the translation workshop of the famous Tang [*sic*] dynasty translator Buddhahadra (359–429 C.E.);” Gómez 1996: 126, supported by Harrison, Hartmann and Matsuda 2002: 180, where it is dated to 421. See Nattier 2003: 189 and n. 28.

³⁷ Nattier 2003: 192.

³⁸ We will see below, however, that by the date represented by this version of the text, developments had gone well beyond this step in other texts.

³⁹ Of course, one of the names of Amitābha, Amitāyus (“immeasurable life[span]”) actually refers to the notion of this extremely long life, showing how central the idea of extreme longevity was to the Amitābha/Amitāyus cult. However, Nattier has made it clear that it is unlikely that the name Amitāyus is reflected in any of our earliest evidence for this literature. I also cannot follow scholars like Iwamatsu Asao and Wogihara Unrai in their hypothesis that the ultimate name underlying the various names of Amitābha is *Amṛta, exciting though such an idea might be in principle. See Radich 2007: Appendix 3.

The Buddha said to Ananda, “The length of the life span of the Buddha of Measureless Life cannot be calculated. Do you want to know to what extent? If, for example, all the numberless living beings in the world systems in ten regions of the universe were to obtain a human body and were all caused to be in full possession of the state of a disciple or solitary Buddha, and if they then all gathered and assembled in one place and in deep meditation single-mindedly used the power of their knowledge to determine the length of the life span of this Buddha, and, during a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand cosmic ages, counted, all of them together, they would not succeed in knowing the limits of his life span, even if they counted for many cosmic ages.”⁴⁰

The same is true of the length of the life span of the assemblies of disciples, bodhisattvas, gods, and humans in that land, which cannot be known by counting or by analogy.”⁴¹

Further passages in both versions of the text reiterate these same doctrines.⁴² The greatest conceivable aggregation of intellectual power in the universe, given an effectively limitless amount of time in which to count, could not count high enough to measure the lifespans in question.⁴³ A lifespan this long, surely, becomes extremely difficult to distinguish from complete immortality, and is somewhat difficult to reconcile with the claim that Amitābha eventually does enter *parinirvāṇa*. This may have created an inherent

⁴⁰ Gómez 1996: 178; cf. also 167, where Amitābha vows that his lifespan will have no limit. Gómez translates from “Saṃghavarman,” but the passage is essentially the same in both earlier translations: Lokakṣema, T362 12.308c27–309a11 (and cf. 302a16–21); Zhi Qian, T361 12.290c14–291a01.

⁴¹ Gómez 1996: 178; see also the vows at 167. 其國中悉諸菩薩阿羅漢。無有婦女。壽命無央數劫。女人往生。即化作男子; T362 12.303c08–09. Once more, this idea is repeated in the 21st vow, corresponding to Saṃghavarman’s Vow 15; 302a28–30; see also 313b16–19. Corresponding passages in the text ascribed to “Lokakṣema” but actually by Zhi Qian: T361 12.281b22–24; 283a20–21; etc.

⁴² T362 12.308a13–14; 308c05–07; T361 12.281b18–21; 290b20–22.

⁴³ Cf. arguments in the philosophy of mathematics, suggesting that it is meaningless to conceive of infinity as of any greater magnitude than the highest possible countable number; for instance, the number to which the most powerful conceivable supercomputer could count through the entire lifespan of the cosmos.

tension in the doctrine, which was quick to crumble at the next phase of development, as we will see immediately below.

Similar doctrines are also found in a number of other texts translated by Lokakṣema, Zhi Qian and Dharmarakṣa. Texts claim that there are Buddhas with extremely long or infinite life remote in time and space, or that all beings in certain *kalpas*, buddha-lands, continents etc. have hyperbolically long lifespans.⁴⁴ In some versions of the Prajñāpāramitā texts, it is also taken as read that *bodhisattvas* can attain to such lifespans.⁴⁵ In other cases, we find the same combination seen in earlier versions of the Longer *Sukhāvātīvyūha*: Buddhas have extremely long lifespans, but the texts also clearly speak of their eventual *parinirvāṇa*.⁴⁶

In sum, as early as we can see after the Pāli canon, the idea had already developed that cosmically remote Buddhas had inordinately long lifespans. The *Akṣobhyavyūha* may indicate that this is an older stage in the development of the ideas that concern us here. Even in Lokakṣema's earlier *Sukhāvātīvyūha*, however, we

⁴⁴ E.g. in Lokakṣema's *Drumakinnararājaparipṛcchā*, T624 15.362b22–24; Zhi Qian's **Mahālalikāparipṛcchā*, T559 14.912b05–13; Dharmarakṣa's *Lotus Sutra*, T263 9.74b17–26, 86b23–27; Dharmarakṣa's *Tathāgatopattisaṃbhava-nirdeśa*, T291: 10.597a25–27; Dharmarakṣa's **Mañjuśrī-buddhakṣetraḡuṇavyūha*, T318: 11.895c14–20, 897c25–29; his **Sarvaḡuṇya-samuccayasamādhī-sūtra*, T381: 12.981b20–23; Dharmarakṣa's *Bhadrakalpita-sūtra*, T425: 14.10b09–13; etc. etc. *Pace Guang* (2005: 120), the short chapters on lifespan found in various versions of the *Avatamsaka-sūtra* also belong to this same category: T278 9.589c01–19 (Buddhabhadra), T279: 10.241a16–b05 (Śikṣānanda).

⁴⁵ In Dharmarakṣa's *Pañca*, T222 8.156c16–19, 151b19–25, 212a15–19; Moksāla, T221 8.39b20–25; cf. Conze 1975: 97. Cf. also Dharmarakṣa's **Lokottara(parivarta)-sūtra*, T292: 10.633a29–b01; Lokakṣema's *Aṣṭa* T224 8.430c16–18, b18–24; Zhi Qian's *Aṣṭa* T225 8.483b17–22, 487b07–15, 496a09–17; Zhi Qian's *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* T474: 14.533c03–05.

⁴⁶ See Lokakṣema's *Drumakinnararājaparipṛcchā*, T624: 15.362b24–c01; Ch. 1 of Dharmarakṣa's *Lotus*, where a Buddha is long-lived enough to preach the same *sūtra* for sixty minor *kalpas* on end, but nonetheless enters *parinirvāṇa*, T263 9.66b08–10, Hurvitz 1976: 15, Watson 1993: 16; Dharmarakṣa's *Bhadrakalpita-sūtra*, e.g. 滅度之後舍利分布, T425: 14.29c14; 44b18–19; *parinirvāṇa* as a preface to the production of relics, **Lokottara(parivarta)-sūtra*, T292: 10.624a22–23, 624c25.

may also find the notion that one Buddha (Mahāsthāmaprāpta) might even be entirely exempt from *parinirvāṇa*, and therefore effectively immortal. Certainly, by Dharmarakṣa's time (the middle of the third century), the idea is current that a Buddha, or Buddhas in general, do not in fact enter *parinirvāṇa*. Thus, excepting the anomaly of Lokakṣema's Mahāsthāmaprāpta, the general pattern is of two phases of development: 1) Buddhas in other world-systems are extremely long-lived but ultimately mortal; 2) Buddhas are exempt from *parinirvāṇa* and entirely immortal.

All these texts are still dominated by their attention to the situation "a long time ago" or "in galaxies far, far away." By contrast, another current of thought began, perhaps from this same period, ascribing immortality to Śākyamuni himself – the Buddha of our age and our world. We now turn to those ideas.

The first apparent ascription of immortality to Śākyamuni in Dharmarakṣa's *Lotus*

An important development, related to the claim that Buddhas are immortal, is seen at least as early as Dharmarakṣa (late third century). The same texts already cited above on lifespan also assert outright that the *parinirvāṇa* is a mere docetistic show.⁴⁷ For example, in Dharmarakṣa's *Tathāgatopattisambhava-nirdeśa* (a part of the

⁴⁷ Outside the evidence presented by the Chinese canon, Verse 22 of the *Nirāupamyastava*, attributed to Nāgārjuna, also specifically states that the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha was a mere docetistic show. If this text is genuinely by Nāgārjuna, it would constitute the earliest evidence I know of for the application of the docetic conceit to the *parinirvāṇa*. See Radich 2007 §4.2.11; the presence of this doctrine in the *Nirāupamyastava* has already been noted in Harrison 1982. The same doctrine is also found in the following verse from the *Catuhstava* cited by Shimoda: "Neither disease nor impurity is in your body; it is not subject to hunger or thirst; and still in order to conform with the world, you have shown a worldly behavior (sic.). Your body is permanent (*nitya*), imperishable (*dhruva*), auspicious (*śiva*). It is the very law; it is the Victorious One. Still in order for people to be converted [to the path of salvation], you show your passing away into *nirvāṇa*;" Shimoda 1994: 23 (L).

proto-*Avataṃsaka* corpus),⁴⁸ we are told that the Buddha does not really enter into *parinirvāṇa*, because he is completely identical to and interfused with the *dharmadhātu* (of all *dharmas*; 如來皆入一切法界). His apparent *parinirvāṇa* is a mere show (recalling the docetistic Buddhology of e.g. *Lokānuvartanā-sūtra* T807, LAn), like a magician's illusion; so, too, the very body that apparently dies is also a docetistic show (猶如幻化現如來身).⁴⁹ Other examples of this doctrine, in contexts also echoing LAn-style docetism, are found in Dharmarakṣa's **Lokottara(parivarta)-sūtra* T292 (also part of the proto-*Avataṃsaka* corpus);⁵⁰ and in Dharmarakṣa's **Sarvaṇyāsamuccayasamādhi-sūtra*.⁵¹

⁴⁸ See Boucher 1996: 276.

⁴⁹ T291: 10.611c29–612a17

⁵⁰ T292: 10.625b05–12, 634c28–635a01, 638b01, 645b15–17. These ideas exist side by side in the text with other passages, already noted at n. 46, which speak uncomplicatedly of the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha.

It is striking that more than one of our examples is drawn from the proto-*Avataṃsaka* corpus. It seems possible that the *Avataṃsaka* corpus took up with particular enthusiasm the docetistic Buddhology that first appears in LAn.

The link between these doctrines of a docetistic *parinirvāṇa*, etc., and the identity of all *dharmas*/the *dharmadhātu* with original *nirvāṇa* is also extremely interesting. I have argued elsewhere that Dharmarakṣa's proto-*Avataṃsaka* texts are connected to the emergence of the fully-fledged Mahāyāna conception of the *dharmakāya* in the same layer of our record. See Radich 2007: Ch. 4.5, where I argue that even *rūpakāya*, and its opposition to *dharmakāya*, may originally be a Mahāyāna notion.

This may in turn suggest that the notion of *rūpakāya* is originally associated with the docetistic interpretation of the Buddha's last earthly existence and body; *rūpakāya* may thus place more emphasis on the Buddha's final earthly body as *visible* rather than *material* and *tangible* body; and this may be connected to the frequent use of the concept in the context of the concern with *darśan*, classically articulated in the *Vakkali-sutta*.

⁵¹ T381: 12.980b01–02, 986c07–08. These ideas are combined with the exposition of the originally pure *dharmadhātu* (or originally pure *sarva-dharma*) as a kind of original *nirvāṇa*, T381: 12.982c14–15, 983a13, 984b29–c01, etc. When the Buddha says he will die in three months, and Ānanda laments, the text says that for anyone who upholds the *dharma*, *the Buddha does not enter parinirvāṇa* and the *dharma* is not extinguished; and that “for one who is equipped with this *dharma*, the Buddha exists for ever.” This

The immortality of the Buddha is the logical corollary of a docetistic interpretation of his apparent death. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that around the same time (in the Chinese record), the “Lifespan” chapter of Dharmarakṣa’s *Lotus Sūtra* (ca. 286) contains the earliest statements I have found yet that the lifespan of the *current* Buddha of *this* world-system is in fact measureless or infinite. There, though the Chinese is a little difficult to make out in places, it seems clear that Śākyamuni himself is in fact immortal, and his apparent *parinirvāṇa* is a docetistic show.⁵²

We first learn that the Buddha Śākyamuni’s lifespan is in fact immense:

All the *devas*, *nāgas*, *asuras*, and men in all the worlds think that they know, and believe to themselves, that the World-Honoured One, Śākyamuni, set out from the land of the Śākyas, renouncing kingdom and kingship; travelled to the bank of the river; betook himself to the seat of awakening (*bodhimāṇḍa*) and sat under the tree; and attained to the unsurpassed correct path and realised supreme perfect awakening. And yet, [in fact,] I already attained to true, unsurpassed awakening in the very remote past, countless myriads of millions of *nayutas* of *kalpas* ago.⁵³

This declaration is followed by a particularly mind-boggling analogy for the incalculable number of years that have passed since the Buddha in fact attained his awakening;⁵⁴ through all this time he has been teaching constantly in this Sahā world and in countless

is then combined with the *Vakkali-sutta* notion that one does not see the Buddha in his *rūpa* or his marks, but in the *dharma* (without any reference to the corporeal conceit): T381: 12.988c06–17. In other words, it seems that the emphasis in this old narrative has shifted to the idea of the Buddha’s ongoing, permanent survival of his (therefore apparent) *nirvāṇa*.

⁵² In the following, I will describe these ideas precisely as they appear in Dharmarakṣa, but will provide cross-references to Skt. versions and English translations for the reader’s convenience.

⁵³ T263 9.113b01–06; Kern and Nanjio 1912: 316; P. L., Vaidya 1960: 189; Hurvitz 1976: 237; Watson 1993: 225.

⁵⁴ T263 9.113b06–27, Kern and Nanjio 1912: 316–317; Vaidya 1960: 190–191; Hurvitz 1976: 237–238; Watson 1993: 225.

other worlds also.⁵⁵

We are then informed that the apparent *parinirvāṇa* of Buddhas like Dīpaṃkara was merely a docetic show, an expedient means manifested by Śākyamuni himself, just as he manifests the teaching of the Dharma in this world.⁵⁶ The Buddha then begins to expound upon the nature and operation of expedient means (*upāya*), and the first example he gives is that he “speaks of [*pari-*]nirvāṇa, even though I do not enter into extinction” (亦不滅度而說泥洹).⁵⁷ Thus, not only is the Buddha’s lifespan incalculably long, and the *parinirvāṇa* of other Buddhas like Dīpaṃkara a docetic show; Śākyamuni’s own *parinirvāṇa* is a show, and therefore he is in fact immortal.

As Dharmarakṣa’s version of the chapter progresses, the claim that the Buddha has in fact been awakened since time immemorial is repeated, in tandem with the explanation that he makes it appear a recent event only as an expedient teaching device.⁵⁸ The Buddha says further that in accord with the dictates of *upāya*,

⁵⁵ T263 9.113b27–29.

⁵⁶ Dharmarakṣa’s Chinese is difficult here, but the gist of it, in intention at least, seems to correspond to the clearer Sanskrit: 諸族姓子等。見吾於此忍界講法。復在他方億百千姪諸佛世界而示現。皆悉稱吾為如來至真等正覺。鏡光如來。以諸伴黨若干之數而現滅度。諸族姓子。吾以善權方便。演說經典。現無央數種種瑞應 [reading **nimittāni* in error for *nirmittāni*?], T263 9.113b27–c02; for *yataḥ prabhṛty ahaṃ kulaputrā asyāṃ sahāyāṃ lokadhātau sattvānāṃ dharmāṃ deśayāmi, anyeṣu ca lokadhātukoṭīnayutaśatasahasreṣu, ye ca mayā kulaputrā atrāntarā tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyakṣambuddhāḥ parikīrtitā dīpaṃkaratathāgataprabhṛtayaḥ, teṣāṃ ca tathāgatānāṃ arhatāṃ samyakṣambuddhānāṃ parinirvāṇāni, mayaiḥ tāni kulaputrā upāyakauśalyadharmadeśanābhīnirhāranirmittāni*, Kern and Nanjio 1912: 317; Vaidya 1960: 190; Hurvitz 1976: 238; Watson 1993: 225–226.

⁵⁷ T263 9.113c03–05; cf. Skt. *tasmiṃs tasmin nātmano nāma vyāharati / tasmiṃs tasmiṃs cātmanāḥ parinirvāṇaṃ vyāharati*; also Hurvitz 1976: 238; Watson 1993: 226.

⁵⁸ 這度終始方今出家。成平等覺從來未久。甫乃逮得無上正真道成最正覺。又如來成佛已來甚久。故佛說言。得佛未久。所以者何。欲化眾生故, T263 9.113c08–11, 113c10, *acirābhisambuddho ’smi bhikṣavo ’nuttarāṃ samyakṣambodhim / yat khalu punaḥ kulaputrāḥ, tathāgata evaṃ cirābhisambuddha evaṃ vyāharati – acirābhisambuddho ’ham asmīti, nānyatra sattvānāṃ paripācanārtham*, Vaidya 1960: 190; Kern and Nanjio 1912: 318.

... wishing to make sentient beings plant the roots of the various virtues (*sarvakuśalamūla*), I discriminate and teach for them various *dharmas* (Skt. *vividhān dharmaparyāyān vividhair ārambaṇair vyāharati*); [and so,] although in fact [I have long since] accomplished all that a Tathāgata ought to accomplish, I make a show of attaining buddhahood here and now. [In reality] it is an immensely long time since I attained buddhahood and realised *saṃyaksambodhi*; [my] lifespan is immeasurable; [I = the Tathāgata (Skt.)] endure forever, and do not become extinct (壽命無量常住不滅度; *aparimitāyuspramāṇas tathāgataḥ sadā sthītaḥ; aparinirvṛtas tathāgataḥ*).⁵⁹

In fact, it would not be possible for me to fulfil the limit of my lifespan even in all the time I have practiced *bodhisattva* practices through all my past lives, even from the very beginning; nor even in twice the enormous span of time since I became Buddha, as conveyed by the analogy I gave earlier. Nonetheless, I [say I] am “about to enter *parinirvāṇa* in the *nirvāṇa*[*dhātu* without remainder].”⁶⁰ Why is this? In order to convert sentient beings.⁶¹

⁵⁹ 欲令眾生殖眾德本。故為分別說若干法。又如來所當作者皆悉作之。現這得佛。又如來所當作者皆悉作之。現這得佛。成平等覺已來大久。壽命無量常住不滅度, T263 9.113c20–23. *sattvānāṃ ... kuśalamūlasaṃjananārthaṃ vividhān dharmaparyāyān vividhair ārambaṇair vyāharati / yad dhi kulaputrās tathāgatenā kartavyaṃ tat tathāgataḥ karoti / tāvac cirābhisambuddho 'parimitāyuspramāṇas tathāgataḥ sadā sthītaḥ / aparinirvṛtas tathāgataḥ*. Skt. continues, in a claim not paralleled in Dharmarakṣa but not out of keeping with its spirit, *parinirvāṇam ādarśayati vaineṃyavaśena*, “I show a *parinirvāṇa* out of an intent to convert [sentient beings];” Kern and Nanjio 1912: 318–319; Vaidya 1960: 190.

⁶⁰ 於泥洹而般泥洹。This reads like the frequent formula **nirvāṇadhātu parinirvā*, “enter *parinirvāṇa* in the *nirvāṇadhātu* [without remainder],” but the actual words “*dhātu* without remainder” are missing.

⁶¹ 又如來不必初始。所說前過去世時行菩薩法。以為成就壽命限也。又如來得佛已來。復倍前喻。億百千劫。然後乃於泥洹而般泥洹[Ming only: all other texts 曰]。所以者何。為眾生故而教化之, T263 9.113c23–28; *na ca tāvan me kulaputrā adyāpi paurvikī bodhisattvacaryā*[reading w. K & N against V -āṃ] *pariniṣpādītā / āyuspramāṇam apy aparipūrṇam / api tu khalu punaḥ kulaputrā adyāpi taddviguṇena me kalpakotīnāyutaśatasahasrāṇi bhaviṣyanti āyuspramāṇasyāparipūrṇatvāt / idānīṃ khalu punar ahaṃ kulaputrā aparinirvāyamāṇa eva parinirvāṇam ārocayāmi / tat kasya hetoḥ? sattvān ahaṃ kulaputrā anena paryāyeṇa paripācayāmi*, Kern and Nanjio 1912: 319; Vaidya 1960: 190–191; cf. Hurvitz 1976: 239; Watson 1993: 227. Both Hurvitz and Watson have the Buddha’s lifespan actually ending after twice

The Buddha explains that if he did not engage in this expedient, sentient beings would be complacent and distracted by the pursuit of sense-objects and worldly goods, and would not engage in religious practice. Even though the Buddha is in fact ever present, he thus preaches that the Tathāgata is rare in the world, in order to make sentient beings seize the moment and practise diligently.⁶²

It is clear from this chapter that already in Dharmarakṣa's time, the understanding that Śākyamuni himself is immortal had taken root, at least in the *Lotus* context. Śākyamuni is presented as the only real Buddha (or else perhaps it is more accurate to say that there is only one Buddha, of whom Śākyamuni and other Buddhas are mere emanations for expedient purposes), and he is in fact eternal. This is conjoined to the docetistic interpretation of the *parinirvāṇa*. Dharmarakṣa's *Lotus* is thus, to my knowledge,⁶³ the earliest text that takes the final step in the development we are tracing here, and applies the idea of actual immortality to Śākyamuni himself. This may mean that the *Lotus* plays a particularly central role in generalising the doctrine of immortality of the Buddhas and cementing it in place.

The idea of Śākyamuni's immortality was not to remain a monopoly of the *Lotus* for very long. Around 400 C.E., there is nothing short of an explosion of the idea that Śākyamuni too is virtually or actually immortal. We now turn to those ideas.

the limit described in the analogy earlier in the chapter, but I believe this interpretation is erroneous.

⁶² T263 9.113c27–114a10, Kern and Nanjio 1912: 319–320; Vaidya 1960: 191; Hurvitz 1976: 239–240; Watson 1993: 227. Some of these ideas are repeated later in the chapter, especially in the verse summary, but this much will suffice for our purposes.

⁶³ See n. 6.

An explosion of new ideas about immortality in the Chinese record around 400 C.E.

The new trend portraying the current Buddha as immortal is best exemplified by various dedicated chapters on longevity in Mahāyāna scriptures. The most extensive treatment of the doctrine is found in the relevant chapters of the (Mahāyāna) *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahā-sūtra* (MPNMS).⁶⁴ Chapter Four is entitled “On Long Life.”

Some lengthy scene-setting first depicts a vast cosmic panoply of beings wailing and gnashing their teeth in distress at the Tathāgata’s imminent demise. It is then revealed that the Buddha’s lifespan is in fact incalculably long: “You cannot calculate the length of my life.”⁶⁵ The Buddha is asked how *bodhisattvas* can similarly attain such long life – and an adamant, indestructible body, immense strength, etc.⁶⁶ – and replies that the *bodhisattva* should do as he himself has done in former lives, i.e. show compassion towards all beings as if they were his own children; teach them various good practices; save beings in various evil destinies, and

⁶⁴ The MPNMS was translated into Chinese twice in the first part of the fifth century: by Buddhahadra 佛陀跋陀羅 and Faxian 法顯 in 416–418; and by *Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 beginning in 421. In this paper, I will cite T375, the “Southern” version (a revision of *Dharmakṣema’s “Northern” translation, made sometime in the decade or so after *Dharmakṣema’s version itself by Huiyan 慧嚴, Huiguan 慧觀, Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 et al.); for the reader’s convenience, I will also give references to the English translation in Yamamoto 1973–1975, abbreviated “Y;” Yamamoto’s translation, however, is often unreliable, and I will freely adapt it as needed. Note that though Yamamoto presents his work as a translation of T374, according to Yuyama, it is in fact a translation from Shimaji’s *Kokuyaku issakyō* 国訳一切経 classical Japanese translation of the text, and further, that Shimaji translated the Southern version T375; Yuyama 1981: 14.

⁶⁵ 我之壽命不可稱量; T375: 12.619b02–03, Y 1:61. This line does not seem to be paralleled in Tib. (D 37b).

⁶⁶ 云何得長壽/ 金剛不壞身/ 復以何因緣/ 得大堅固力, T375: 12.619b22–b23, Y 1:61; Tib. *thub pa cis na tshe ring ’gyur/ rdo rje lta bur cis ’gyur lags// gang gis mi shigs thob par ’gyur/ cis na lus brtan stobs chen ’gyur*, D 37b; note that Tib. only speaks of being “like *vajra*,” with the relation to body also displaced by the change in word order. We will return to this relation to *vajra* below.

so on.⁶⁷ In other words, the Buddha's extreme longevity is clearly understood as the fruit of the immense merit accumulated through countless incarnations of *bodhisattva* practices.

Kāśyapa confronts the Buddha with the apparent contradiction between these statements and the fact that he appears to be on the brink of death, before living even a hundred years in the world.⁶⁸ The Buddha again asserts that his life is the longest of all: his life is to the lives of ordinary individual beings like the waters of the great ocean to the waters of all the rivers of the world and their tributaries,⁶⁹ and so forth. This immense longevity of the Buddha is described in the same terms (“a *kalpa* ...”) as in the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*,⁷⁰ and as there, is also related to the superpowers.⁷¹ Such powers, it is explained, are accessible even to lesser beings, let alone the Tathāgata, and in fact, if the Tathāgata so wished, he could live for “half a *kalpa*, a *kalpa*, one hundred *kalpas*, one hundred thousand *kalpas*, or innumerable *kalpas*.”⁷² The text thus directly states that the present Buddha has the potential for virtually infinite life.⁷³

Similar ideas are also found in a number of other texts from this period.⁷⁴ In the *Sūtra of Golden Light* (*Suvarṇabhāsottama-sūtra*, first translated into Chinese by *Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 [385–433]), Chapter 2, “The Measure of Life of the Tathāgata,” teaches,

⁶⁷ T375: 12.620b03–09, Y 1:64–65.

⁶⁸ T375 12.621a22–b04, Y 1:68.

⁶⁹ T375 12.621b05–14, Y 1:68–69.

⁷⁰ See the discussion of DN 16 above, p. 231. Seemingly the phrase is somehow mistranslated in the Chinese: 應住一劫若減一劫; T375 12.621b21, b24, Y 1:69.

⁷¹ T375 12.621b23–28, Y 1:69.

⁷² T375 12.621b28–c01, Y 1:69. We will see below that Kāśyapa's question here motivates the introduction of a direct statement of docetic doctrine, with implications for doctrines of embodiment.

⁷³ This doctrine is, of course, related to the text's doctrine that buddha-hood (buddha-nature, *tathāgatagarbha* etc.) is permanent (*nitya*). However, we should keep in mind the fact that, if the text is stratified, e.g. as Shimoda proposes, these ideas may not be of the same vintage.

⁷⁴ These passages are discussed in Guang 2005: 119–122.

Think not so, noble son, (that) the measure of life of the Lord Śākyamuni was so brief ... We do not see anyone in the world of gods, [etc.] ... who would be able to understand to the furthest end the limit of the measure of the life of the Tathāgata.

In fact, the Buddha's life is more countless than drops of water in the ocean, atoms in Mt Sumeru, atoms on earth, etc.⁷⁵ The *Śūraṅgamasamādhi-sūtra* (translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva [344–ca. 413, active as translator 401–ca. 413]) also features a short section on extreme longevity: the Buddha's lifespan is “seven hundred *asaṃkhyeyakalpa*,” but he will then enter *parinirvāṇa*.⁷⁶ Kumārajīva's **Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (MPPU) clearly teaches that the Buddha has an immeasurable lifespan in several passages,⁷⁷ accounting for the apparent discrepancy in lifespan of various Buddhas by a doctrine that there are two forms of lifespan accruing to a Buddha, manifest and concealed, where the concealed, true lifespan of all Buddhas is limitless.⁷⁸ The docetic interpretation of these facts is explicitly stated.⁷⁹ We also find similar themes in Saṃghadeva's (fl. 383–398) Āgama translations.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ T663 16.335c17ff.; Emmerick 1970: 3–5; Nobel 1937: 6. Chen 2004: 215–263, argues that *Dharmakṣema's arrival in Guzang 姑臧 most likely took place in 420, thus narrowing the date of translation of this text to the period 420–433.

⁷⁶ T642 15.644c27–645a05ff.; see Lamotte 1965: 267–270. The Buddha tells Dṛḍhamati about a world (*lokadhātu*) in the East called Pratimaṇḍitā, in which dwells a Tathāgata called Vairocanaśmipratimaṇḍitavikurvaṇarāja. The Buddha's lifespan is equal to this Tathāgata's lifespan. “Thus, you should know that the duration of my life (*āyuspramāṇa*) will be seven hundred *asaṃkhyeyakalpa* and that after that, I will enter definitively into *parinirvāṇa*,” Lamotte 1965: 270. The text goes on to imply that such a duration of life is achievable for all beings by the power of the *śūraṅgamasamādhi*, and further specifies that “in all kingdoms, villages, towns, cities, residences and wildernesses that are penetrated by the *śūraṅgamasamādhi*, neither Māra nor Māra's ilk (*mārajātīya*) will exercise any hold (*avatāraṃ na lapyante*);” Lamotte 1965: 271.

⁷⁷ See also, for example: T1509 25.312a28–b04; 302b14; 311c18–19.

⁷⁸ T1509 25.311c25–28.

⁷⁹ T1509 25.312a29–b01.

⁸⁰ In EA, the Buddha tells Gautamī that he is indeed immortal, 如來延壽

In this layer of our record, these ideas are connected with the Buddha's special body, even where they are not (as below) connected directly to a body of adamant. For example, a tiny text called the *Shi shi hu wu fubao jing* 施食獲五福報經 T132b, which on the basis of its colophon belongs to the Eastern Jin (317–420),⁸¹ lists immortality along with the major and minor marks, the ten powers etc. as characteristics of the *dharmakāya*.⁸² Guṇabhadra's **Angulimālīya-sūtra* T120 (translated between 435 and 443) also has the Buddha tell Mañjuśrī that he has a body free of old age, birth-and-death, sickness and so forth, as a result of the countless meritorious practices he has engaged in through *kalpa* after *kalpa* of previous lives. Among the ways this body is described, it is said to be “deathless” 不死身.⁸³ Likewise, Kumārajīva's MPPU also explains that the body of the Buddha is supreme among *rūpas*, and therefore his longevity must also be supreme among all beings.⁸⁴

These examples could certainly be further multiplied. They include the most significant “lifespan” chapters of the Mahāyāna *sūtra* literature, and should show that in texts translated into Chinese in a few decades around 400 C.E., the idea that Śākyamuni is potentially, virtually or actually immortal is now common. His extreme longevity or immortality is often associated with the immense merit he has earned over aeons of *bodhisattva* practice, and the apparent

無窮。恒護其命; T125 2.592c13–15. Perhaps loosely connected are passages in Saṃghadeva's version of the *Madhyamāgama* (but not in the parallel MN 97 *Dhānañjāni-sutta*), stating that various benefits will accrue to one who behaves in accordance with *dharma* and *karma*, including that his parents, wives, slaves, and Brahmans and *śrāmaṇera* will wish that he live forever 願令大家 … 壽考無窮; T26 1.457a25–b26. Further examples, in texts translated into Chinese later than those listed here are given by la Vallée Poussin: the **Tathāgatapratibimbapratīṣṭhānuśaṃsā-sūtra* T694, the **Buddhabhūmi-sūtra-śāstra* and **Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi*; la Vallée Poussin 1928–1929: 804, 807, 810.

⁸¹ *Hōbōgirin* 27.

⁸² T132B 2.855b18–19.

⁸³ T120 2.536a01–08. Note that the **Angulimālīya* may be connected to the MPNMS group of texts, as evidenced for instance in the fact that it features Sarvasattvapriyadarśana; Hodge 2006.

⁸⁴ T1509 25.312a10–12, cited in la Vallée Poussin 1928–1929: 806.

contradiction between his short lifespan and his real lifespan is explained by direct appeal to docetic doctrine.

In the same period and texts, the Buddha's extreme longevity or immortality is also frequently associated with special qualities of his body. We now turn to the examination of these accompanying doctrines of embodiment, and their emergence.

The body *like* adamant

We will now trace the emergence of the idea that a Buddha's body is absolutely permanent, a notion of embodiment that emerges in parallel with the doctrine of his immortality. This doctrine seems to emerge in two broad phases, which may be loosely correlated with the phases we observe in the emergence of ideas about extreme longevity and immortality. (1) Prior to the fourth century, the Buddha's body is said to be "like adamant (Ch. *jin'gang* 金剛, Skt. *vajra* etc.)," but it is not yet certainly said that his body is indeed "of adamant." (2) In the fourth century, his body is said outright to be made of adamant.

First, let us glance briefly at some possible background to this idea. The earliest place where a "body" of the Buddha is spoken of in terms of *vajra* is in connection with relics.⁸⁵ The earliest such characterisation of relics I know of is found not in the textual record, but in the "Inscription of Senavarma" (first half of the first century C.E.), which speaks of a "final body" (**āntimaśarīra*) as a "mass of *vajra*" (**vajrasamghaṇa*).⁸⁶ The earliest association between *vajra* and relics that I know in the textual record is the tradition that the Buddha creates his relics somehow by entering into

⁸⁵ I have argued elsewhere at length the reasons for which I believe relics should be interpreted as a *body* of the Buddha, among other bodies. See Radich 2007: Ch. 4.1.

⁸⁶ See n. 20; Radich 2007 §4.1.2.5. On this important inscription, see Fussman 1982; Salomon 1986; von Hinüber 2003. See also reviews of von Hinüber by Salomon (2005), Fussman (2003–2004) and Falk (2003). John Strong has noted the possible connection between the adamant nature of relics and "the adamant nature of buddhahood;" Strong 2004: 183.

the *vajropamasamādhi*, already found in Mātṛceta.⁸⁷ The same association is also found in the MPPU;⁸⁸ Kumārajīva’s *Pañca*;⁸⁹ and in Zhu Fonian 竺佛念 (fl. 365–after 399).⁹⁰ We will return to this association between the *vajropamasamādhi* and relics below.⁹¹

Relics are further directly described as like adamant (and gold) as early as MPPU⁹² and in Guṇabhadra’s LAS.⁹³

Thus, a connection between relics and adamant is widespread in the textual record by the close of the period that concerns us here. On the evidence of the Senavarma Inscription, it is possible that this connection predates the other ideas we will study; but this evidence is tenuous, given that the Senavarma Inscription is only

⁸⁷ Bailey assigns Mātṛceta to the first to third century C.E. Mātṛceta describes the *parinirvāna* of the Buddha in part by saying, “Powdering your bones into tiny particles with the diamond of *samādhi*, you did not even at the end give up your habit of performing arduous works” (*yas tvaṃ samādhi-vajreṇa tilaśo ’sthīni cūrṇayan/ atiduṣkarakāritvam ante ’pi na vimuktavān*); Bailey 1951: 143; cited in Skilling 2005: 293.

⁸⁸ When the Buddha enters into Parinirvāna, he first entrusts his Dharma to Maitreya, Kāśyapa and Ānanda, and then “finally he enters into the concentration like adamant (*vajropamasamādhi*) and fragments the bones of his body into tiny pieces the size of mustard seeds,” T1509 25.173c01–03, Lamotte 1966–1980: 2:938–940, cited in Skilling 2005: 293.

⁸⁹ T223 8.293b06–10.

⁹⁰ T384 12.1015b05–06. Jñānabhadra’s (late, i.e. Tang) version “latter portion” 後分 of the MPNMS goes further, and describes this event in terms of the Buddha breaking up *his vajra-body* into tiny *śarīra*, 碎金剛體成末舍利 T377 12.910c27. A king who was not present at the *parinirvāna* subsequently expresses the wish to pay homage to the relics by saying simply, “I want to enter the city and worship the *vajra-śarīra* of the Tathāgata” 我欲入城禮拜如來金剛舍利, 911c07–08, and we thus know it is definitely relics at issue.

⁹¹ See below pp. 276–279.

⁹² The text describes the Buddha’s entry into the *vajra*-like *samādhi* to create his relics at *parinirvāna* as also entailing the “destruction of his *vajrakāya* into minute *śarīrāṇi*” 入金剛三昧中。碎金剛身作末舍利, T1509 25.480a24–25.

⁹³ 如金金剛佛舍利。得奇特性終不損壞, T670 16.512b19; the verses, too, speak of “the *vajra*[-like?] Buddha-relics” 金剛佛舍利, 512c27 (the verse line only is also in Bodhiruci’s version, T671 16.560b8; both passages are echoed by Śikṣānanda, T672 16.621c15, 622a24).

one piece of evidence, and is very difficult to interpret. At the very least, we can say that the idea that the Buddha is embodied in adamant was chronologically paralleled by similar ideas that the relics were adamant, and probably related to those ideas.⁹⁴

Aside from this connection with relics, the idea that the Buddha (or Tathāgata) has a body that is “like adamant” (如金剛, 若金剛, 猶金剛 etc.) is old, and occurs in the layer of our record immediately after the Pāli canon. The oldest such idea is that the Buddha’s body is somehow “like adamant.” It is already attested in numerous earlier contexts, e.g. in Lokakṣema,⁹⁵ Zhi Qian,⁹⁶ and

⁹⁴ This is one of many respects in which relics (*śarīrāṇi*, “bodies”) and other buddha-bodies are spoken of in similar terms. What we might call a “dialectic” between ideas about relics and ideas about other bodies is thus set up, and this dialectic itself, indeed, comprises one of the main arguments for interpreting relics as bodies among other bodies.

⁹⁵ E.g. LAn, T807 17.752a08; *Drumakinnararājaparipṛcchā* T624 15.349c13–15, 350b14–17; **Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā-sūtra*, T626 15.398c26–28. The **Ajātaśatrukaukṛtyavinodanā* passage in particular is remarkable. It plays on the simile of adamant very extensively. To paraphrase Lokakṣema’s difficult Chinese loosely, Mañjuśrī is describing the absolute after the conceit of a “wheel [of Dharma] that does not roll back” (**avai-vartikacakra*, 阿惟越致輪), which does not “turn” any of the five *skandhas* (i.e. make or allow them to function, *vyrt*; a paradoxical play on the idea of “turning” the *dharmacakra*; in Fatian’s 法天 parallel [Song] text, we are told explicitly that it is in not making anything “turn” that we speak of “turn the *dharmacakra*,” 其輪無轉相是名轉法輪). In fact, in it, all *dharmas* do not “turn”/“function” because “in **dharmatā*/the **dharmadhātu* [?] no *dharmas* ‘turn’” (法身無法轉). This wheel reaches everywhere, in a manner that is likened to the fact that space pervades all things. This is then likened in turn to the way *vajra* (a needle of *vajra*, 金剛句 in Fatian) penetrates and threads together 鑽穿 all the various gems; in the same manner, this ‘wheel’ penetrates and threads together all *dharmas*, just like space, and for this reason is called “*dharmatā*[-*tā*?].” This is the background for the assertion that concerns us most centrally here: “**Sarvadharmas*/the **dharmadhātu* is/are like [the] *vajra* [in this analogy], comprising the principle that, like space, [runs as a common thread through] the confused variety [of phenomena?]. The Tathāgata is like [the] *vajra*, running throughout all [like/as] emptiness 法身者若金剛。諸所亂者而空理之。怛薩阿竭者如金剛。悉穿無所有; his liberation, like *vajra*, surpasses all unliberated [beings/states?]; [in his?] *nirvāna* he sees all self-originated *dharmas* 其脫如金剛過於諸不脫者。泥洹者見諸自然法,” T626 15.398c11–28. It is unlikely that *fashen* 法身 refers

Dharmarakṣa.⁹⁷

We should be cautious about assuming that these “bodies like adamant” are already the *vajrakāya* more familiar to us from later contexts. In fact, it seems that the connotations of these bodies are on the whole quite different. First, it seems that they are associated less with the Buddha than with broader classes of remarkable beings, to which the Buddha happens to belong. For example, this “body like adamant” is sometimes one of the marks of the

to *dharmakāya*; all instances of *fashen* in this text only ever correspond to **sarvadharmā* or *dharmadhātu* etc. in other versions; Harrison 1992: 63–64. (I cannot see that Harrison studies this particular passage, but the point still holds, as in Fatian, the “wheel that does not roll back” [**avaivartikacakra?*] is the *dharmadhātu* 不退輪者即法界, T628 15.440a13–14; is associated with “the *svabhāva* of all *dharmas*” 諸法自性, 440a25, etc.; but is not called **dharmakāya*.) Nonetheless, the analogy to *vajra* here hinges closely on the identity of the Tathāgata with the Buddhist “absolute” (*dharmadhātu*, *sarvadharmadharmatā* etc.) and the interpenetration of both Tathāgata and absolute into all things. This suggests that the conceit of *vajra* is still somehow being associated with the emergent proto-*dharmakāya* (on Mahāyāna predecessors of *dharmakāya* proper, see Radich 2007: Ch. 4.3). Finally, it is notable that the metaphor of *vajra* here hinges on extreme hardness (making it possible for it to “penetrate” anything), not on indestructibility or permanence, as when it is linked to the trope of immortality.

⁹⁶ E.g. in his *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, T474 14.523b24–27: 我言。居士。佛身小中風當用牛漚。故我到此。維摩詰言。止止。唯阿難。莫作是語。如來身者金剛之數。眾惡已斷諸善普會。當有何病。 Skt. seems much more concrete: *tam enam aham etad avocam: bhagavato gr̥hapate kāyasya kaścīd evābādhaḥ/ tatra ca kṣīreṇa kṛtyam, tat paryeṣāmi/ sa mām evam āha: alaṃ bhadantānanda mā evam vocaḥ/ vajrasam̐hatano hi bhadantānanda tathāgatakāyaḥ sarvākuśalavāsānāprahīṇaḥ sarvamaḥajaskakuśaladharmasamanvāgataḥ/ kutas tasya vyādhiḥ kuta upadravaḥ*, Study Group 2006: 33; see Lamotte 1962: §3.43. Compare to *vajrasam̐hatano* the **vajrasam̐ghana[taḥ]* (on von Hinüber’s Skt. reconstruction) of the Senavarma Inscription. Skt. is reflected more closely by Kumārajīva: 如來身者，金剛之體, T475 14.542a07–08. The context here is a docetistic reinterpretation of the Buddha’s apparent sickness as expedient means.

⁹⁷ E.g. 如來身者金剛之數 in his *Lishi yishan jing* 力士移山經 T135 2.859a26–27; **Upāyakakauśalyajñānottarabodhisattvapariṣṭhā-sūtra*, T345 12.164a13–16; 如來之身金剛德體 etc., **Candraprabhākumāra-sūtra* T534 14.816a29–b10.

mahāpuruṣa.⁹⁸ Such bodies are also sometimes said to be available not only to the Buddha alone, but also to *bodhisattvas*.⁹⁹ There is even a whole world where all beings have such bodies.¹⁰⁰

Further, the body like adamant in these texts is associated with qualities other than permanence and immortality. It is associated with purity in LAN¹⁰¹ and the *Fenbie gongde lun* 分別功德論 T1507;¹⁰² and it is also associated on occasion with strength.¹⁰³ In Zhi Qian's *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* it is associated with freedom from sickness and “bad *dharmas*.”¹⁰⁴ The body like adamant has roughly the same associations, except immunity from sickness, in Dharmarakṣa's **Candraprabhākumāra-sūtra*.¹⁰⁵ In Dharmarakṣa's **Upāyākakauśalyajñānottarabodhisattvapariṣcchā-sūtra*, the

⁹⁸ E.g. in Zhi Qian's **Brahmāyur-sūtra*, T76 1.883c27.

⁹⁹ E.g. Dharmarakṣa's *Akṣayamati-nirdeśa*, T403 13.589b03–05.

¹⁰⁰ E.g. Dharmarakṣa's *Mukākumāra-sūtra* T401 13.532b08–22.

¹⁰¹ LAN: 佛身如金剛淨潔無瑕穢無清便。現人大小清便。隨世間習俗而入。示現如是, T807 17.752a08–09. Tib: *sku mkhregs rdo rje 'dra ba'i phyir// zag pa dag ni mi mnga' yang//gshang* [D: *bshang*] *ba'i sar ni gshegs mdzad pall 'di ni 'jig rten mthun 'jug yin//* (v. 33). Note that Tib. emphasises hardness, where Ch. emphasises purity and flawlessness. Tib. says again that the Buddha has an adamant body (v. 76), but in a context which seems to me to have no direct Ch. equivalent: *de bzhin gshegs pa rdo rje'i skull sangs rgyas cung zad mi snyung* [D: *bsnyun*] *yang//dge slong byang chub yan lag smos// 'di ni 'jig rten mthun 'jug yin//* Harrison correlates this Tib. verse with what he calls “§74” of the Chinese text; Harrison 1982.

¹⁰² 佛身金剛無有諸漏, T1507 25.35c16–17. However, elsewhere the text *does* associate the body like adamant with indestructibility: 如來身者金剛之數。不可敗壞, 37c12. The *Fenbie gongde lun* is a commentary on EA ascribed to the Han dynasty in the Taishō canon. Note that unless it was composed outside China on the basis of an underlying Indic EA, it should in fact most likely date after the translation of EA itself in the late 300s. Nattier calls *Fenbie gongde lun* a “Chinese treatise of uncertain date;” Nattier 2008: 129 n. 49. Lamotte says that the text is half Mahāyānist and half Mahāsaṃghika, “Buddhist Controversy over the Five Theses;” cited in Nattier and Prebish 1977: 257 n. 67.

¹⁰³ E.g. 身力如金剛/禪思不可動 in Dharmarakṣa's *Pu yao jing* 普曜經, T186 3.511b17; see also the quote from T135 above n. 97.

¹⁰⁴ Cited above, n. 96.

¹⁰⁵ 如來之身金剛德體, T534 14.816b07–08.

body like adamant is used to convey the idea that the Buddha is merely impervious to physical harm (in a context rich with docetic associations).¹⁰⁶ In Dharmarakṣa's *Lishi yi shan jing* 力士移山經 (a text in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* corpus), the idea that the Buddha's body is like adamant is even coupled to precisely the idea that he is *not* permanent; he is about to enter *parinirvāṇa* despite the fact that his body is adamant, and this proves that the greatest power of all is impermanence.¹⁰⁷

In these texts, then, there is as yet no clear association between the notion of the adamant body of the Buddha and any particular conception of his lifespan. However, in some of the texts examined above, in which cosmically remote Buddhas are long-lived or immortal, the body of the Buddha is also said to be like adamant. Indeed, bodies like adamant seem to be found often in texts that also include Buddhas exempt from *parinirvāṇa*: *Drumakinnararājaparipṛcchā*, *Sarvapūṇyasamuccayasamādhi*, and *Bhadra-kalpita*. However, the association between the body like adamant and immortality does not yet seem very strong. The association is closest in *Drumakinnararājaparipṛcchā* which claims at once that the body is like adamant and that the Tathāgata¹⁰⁸ is unarisen and has no extinction because he “does not come and go” etc.¹⁰⁹ *Sarva-*

¹⁰⁶ The context is the famous parable of the *bodhisattva* killing a man on board a boat to save the lives of five hundred merchants he knew were destined to become Buddhas; this past is supposedly betrayed by the Buddha's body being pierced in various ways in the present life, but in fact, the text tells us, his body is really adamant; T345 12.163c11–164b06; Tatz 1994: 74–75.

¹⁰⁷ 無常之力計為最勝多所消伏。所以者何。如來身者金剛之數。無常勝我當歸壞敗。吾今夜半當於力士所生之地而取滅度, etc. T135 2.859a25–27. This text and passage strikes me as particularly important, and we will return to it below, p. 266.

¹⁰⁸ *Tathāgata* is here translated 法如怛薩, which looks something like **dharmatāgata*, **dharmatathatāgata*, “[the one] gone to the Thusness of *dharmas*.” See Makransky 1997: 373 n. 9 for an independent suggestion of the possibility of such a reading of *tathāgata* (in the context of the Thusness chapter of *Aṣṭa*).

¹⁰⁹ 亦無所從來。無所從去 … 其德若大山。身者若金剛, T624 15.349c10–14.

puṇyasamuccayasamādhi emphasises rather strength.¹¹⁰ *Bhadra-kalpita* emphasises that the body is like adamant and therefore “indestructible.”¹¹¹

In all these instances, the various bodies at issue are “like adamant.” In this layer of the Chinese record, to my knowledge, the compound *jin’gangshen* 金剛身 = **vajrakāya* never appears.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ 得堅強力身如鉤鎖行如金剛, T381 12.986c12.

¹¹¹ 身無能壞堅如金剛, T425 14.26c03–04.

¹¹² Two possible exceptions to the pattern I am claiming here may be found in the *Aśokāvadāna*, thought to date to the second century, with a *terminus ante quem* in Faqin’s 法欽 (fl. 281–306) translation; Strong 1992: 170; Mukhopadhyaya 1963: lx. (1) Aśoka says that he must go personally to see Upagupta (described elsewhere as “a Buddha without the marks,” Strong 1992: 174), because Upagupta is an excellent being, and it would be insulting for Aśoka to summon him. In describing Upagupta’s excellence, the Sanskrit has Aśoka say, in part: “I think that Upagupta’s body is made of *vajra*./ harder than a rock (*manye vajramayaṃ tasya dehaṃ śailopamādhikam*);” Strong 1992: 240; Mukhopadhyaya 1963: 77. However, Faqin’s Chinese does not match: “[It is I who] must go to see him, because I have not yet attained to the mind of *vajra*; how, then, can I force him into submission [to me], [he] who is a man like the Buddha?” 彼應往見。何以故我今未得金剛心故。云何屈彼如佛之人, T2042 50.102c03–04; cf. Przyluski 1923: 247. Saṃghavarman’s sixth century translation also does not mention a “body made of adamant,” but rather says that Upagupta has a mind made of adamant; 處世同如來/ 名優波笈多/ 若不受其教/ 其心金剛造, T2043 50.135c15–16. (2) Elsewhere in Faqin, a verse states “even a body and mind of adamant is nonetheless heir to destruction; how, then, could frail bodies and minds escape it?” 金剛之身心/ 猶尚有壞敗/ 況危脆身心/ 而當不破壞, T2042 50.127b20–23; cf. Przyluski 1923: 406. However, it is not clear who is attributed with this adamant body and mind; there is no extant Sanskrit for this chapter, Strong 1992: 170; and no parallel to this chapter in Saṃghavarman, Przyluski 1923: 399 n. 1; there is thus no further evidence we can examine upon whose basis to substantiate a firmer reading of the passage. For these reasons, this passage cannot be regarded as a firm exception to the chronological pattern I identify here.

Another possible exception is in Dharmarakṣa’s *Akṣayamati-nirdeśa*, dating to 308 C.E; Braarvig 1993: II, xli. The *bodhisattva* resolves, “I will attain that body of the Tathāgatas, the body of [all] moments of existence, the adamant body, the uncrushable body, the firm body, the body distinct from the threefold world;” Tib. *bdag gis de bzhin gshegs pa’i sku, chos kyi sku, rdo rje’i sku, mi shigs pa’i sku, brtan pa’i sku, khams gsum thams cad las khyad par du ’phags pa’i sku de sgrub par bya’o*; Braarvig reconstructs Skt. *aham*

Further, even worded in other terms, the proposition is rarely put that the Buddhas have an “adamant body” *per se*. I am only aware of two possible exceptions: 1) one in the *Fenbie gongde lun*;¹¹³ 2) one in the *Xingqi xing jing* 興起行經, ascribed to Kang Mengxiang 康孟詳 (fl. ca. 190–220?).¹¹⁴ Notably, the attribution and dating of both these texts is uncertain.

By contrast, in the layer of our record reflected by Chinese translations from the decades around 400 C.E., *jin’gangshen* = **vajrakāya* suddenly appears in a number of contexts. We now turn to that evidence.

The advent of *vajrakāya* in the Chinese record ca. 400 C.E.

We already began looking at the (Mahāyāna) *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* (MPNMS) above (p. 245).¹¹⁵ Kāśyapa asks about the apparent contradiction between the Buddha’s assertion that he is in truth immortal, and the decrepit, moribund body his worshippers

taṃ tathāgatakāyaṃ dharmakāyaṃ vajrakāyaṃ abhedyakāyaṃ dṛḍhakāyaṃ sarvatraidhātuviśiṣṭakāyaṃ pratipatsye; Braarvig I, 126; II, 483–485, cf. Dharmarakṣa T403 13.606b04–08. Braarvig’s *vajrakāya* is reasonable from Tib. *rdo rje’i sku*. However, in Dharmarakṣa we find only “the sacred body of the Buddha, the limitless *dharmakāya* that is like adamant and indestructible” (佛聖體無極法身猶如金剛不可破壞). Dharmarakṣa likely reflects an earlier stage in the composition of the text, and the outright **vajrakāya* in Tib. probably found its way into the text later.

¹¹³ See the first passage cited above in n. 102. As noted there, this text is conventionally assigned to the later Han; however, it is a commentary on EA, which was not translated into Chinese until the late fourth century; and the tradition gives little information about its translation (or production).

¹¹⁴ 我從如來所聞，佛身金剛，不可毀壞， T197 4.169a13–14. This text is not regarded by Nattier (2008) as an authentic Kang Mengxiang translation.

¹¹⁵ In what follows, I usually base my argument at each point on evidence found in at least two of the *Dharmakṣema (treating the “Southern” version T375 as identical to *Dharmakṣema for this purpose), Faxian and independent Tibetan translations of MPNMS (with reference also to Skt. fragments). As is often the case, *Dharmakṣema’s version of the text contains much that is not found in the other versions; this evidence is of dubious value in discussing developments in Buddhism outside China, and where relevant, I mainly mention it in footnotes only.

see before them. This question elicits an overtly docetistic explanation.

Key for our purposes is the fact that this docetism is couched in terms of a doctrine of bodies. On the one hand, the ordinary body seen by the crowd is illusory: “The Tathāgata’s body is a transformed body (變化身, Tib. *sprul pa’i lus*, **nīrmitakāya* or **nair-māṇīkakāya*?) and not one supported by various kinds of food.”¹¹⁶ On the other hand, the extremely long lifespan that we already saw is ascribed to the Buddha is closely associated in following portions of the text with the claim that his true body is an “adamant body” (*jin’gangshen* 金剛身, **vajrakāya*).

We take up the tale where we left off, at the end of the “Long Life” chapter. That chapter ends with a coda on the links between extreme longevity and embodiment. First, the Buddha asserts that *nirvāṇa* is “the *dharmatā* of the Buddhas.”¹¹⁷ The Buddha then explains¹¹⁸ this *dharmatā* (Ch. *faxing* 法性) in confusing¹¹⁹ but significant terms:

What is meant by “the *dharmatā* of the Tathāgata”? *Dharmatā* means “abandoning the body” (捨身, *śarīratyāga*, *lus yongs su ’dor ba*), [but] there is no such thing as “abandoning the body.”¹²⁰ [But]¹²¹ given that

¹¹⁶ 如來此身是變化身非雜食身, T375 12.621c02, Y 1:69.

¹¹⁷ 涅槃義者。即是諸佛之法性也; T375 12.622a28–29, Y 1:72; for 佛法性, Tib. *sangs rgyas rnam kyī chos nyid*, D Tha 44b2; Skt. **buddhānām dharmatā*, Habata 2007: 64–65. In the lead-up to this assertion, the Buddha asserts that he is “constant” (*chang* 常, *nityam*), and that it is as such that the body of the Tathāgata should be known 應當如是知如來身; T375 12.622a23.

¹¹⁸ In the Chinese of *Dharmakṣema and the “Southern” version, the change of speaker is not clear here, and it could appear that Kāśyapa’s question continues; Tib. makes the change of speaker clear.

¹¹⁹ The various versions of the text diverge greatly through this passage. For fragmentary Skt., see Habata 2007: 65–66.

¹²⁰ Ch. 捨身者名無所有 could also mean “if the body is abandoned, then it no longer exists” etc. I have attempted to read in line with Skt. *śarīratyāgo nāma dhigvādaḥ eṣa iti jānīhi*; Tib. *lus yongs su ’dor ba zhes bya ba de ni smad pa’i tshig yin par shes par gyis shig*. Skt. *dhigvāda* “censure, reproach,” and Tib., might seem to suggest that it is heterodox (“slandering” in the specific sense of a slander against the Dharma) to speak of abandoning the body(?). Chinese could just conceivably be read in line with this: 無所有 in

there is no such thing, in what sense does a body continue to exist (身云何存)? [And] if a body still exists, how can we say that body “has *dharmatā*”? If the body “has *dharmatā*,” how can the body still exist? How should we understand this doctrine?¹²²

Most important for us here is the way Kāśyapa’s question already links the Buddha’s attainment of *dharmatā* to his embodiment (or disembodiment). The initial problem, the *dharmatā* of the Buddha, does not explicitly mention the body, but it seems *dharmatā* here may already be implicitly understood in terms of a *dharmatā*-*kāya* of the Buddha.¹²³

the sense that “there is no such thing” (as abandoning the body, i.e. it is an incoherent proposition). However, Stephen Hodge suggests there may be a problem with the text here (personal communication).

¹²¹ At this point Tib., Skt. and Faxian have the speaker change again, back to Kāśyapa. Kāśyapa then asks a somewhat different question in Faxian and Tib.: If (the Tathāgata) abandons the body, does he then appropriate another one, or not? *de bzhin gshegs pas sku bor nas slar yang sku len tam mi len pa*; 如來捨身更受身耶, T376 12.865c03 (following “Palace” and Shōgozō).

¹²² 佛法性者其義云何。世尊。我今欲知法性之義。唯願如來哀愍廣說。夫法性者即是捨身。捨身者名無所有。若無所有身云何存。身若存者云何而言身有法性。身有法性云何得存。我今云何當知是義; T375 12.622b01–06, Y 1:72. Translation modified. It seems that Kāśyapa is here rehearsing a misunderstanding of what it means to “attain” (“get,” “have,” you 有) *dharmatā*. Presumably, an equation is assumed between *dharmatā* and *śūnyatā*, and between *śūnyatā* and “nothing.” Realising the *dharmatā* of a thing entails realising that the thing “of which” one “attains the *dharmatā*” does not in fact exist. Of course, this means Kāśyapa is voicing a dangerous “nihilism” (*apavāda*), and sure enough, the Buddha immediately tells him off.

¹²³ In *Dharmakṣema only, this is at least the case in the Buddha’s response. He says that the realm of the Buddha’s *dharmatā* is analogous to the rarefied meditational heaven of the fourth *dhyaṇa*, wherein beings are indeed embodied (“*rūpa* is perfected”) but there is no concept of *rūpa*. He then ties this to the *dharmakāya*: “You should not say that the body of the Tathāgata is a thing subject to extinction (*miefa* 滅法, **nirodha-dharma*) ... Such doctrines are not within your ken, and the *dharmakāya* of the Buddhas, and [their] various expedients, are inconceivable 諸佛法身種種方便不可思議;” T375 12.622b11–12, 622b15–16, Y 1:72; my translation). The reference to “the body of the Tathāgata” is unique to *Dharmakṣema. Tib. and Skt. say rather that Kāśyapa should not ask whether the Tathāgata appropriates another body (*ma ’dri ... prccheyā mā bhūt* etc.; Tib. however diverges even

Almost immediately following this, the text opens onto Chapter Five,¹²⁴ “On the Adamant Body” 金剛身品,¹²⁵ which is dedicated entirely to the “adamant body,” and which Shimoda Masahiro identifies as “the core chapter” of the entire proto-MPNMS.¹²⁶ This chapter thus provides the answer to the second part of the question that launched Chapter Four on “Long Life.”¹²⁷

How can [one] obtain long life
And an adamant body imperishable?¹²⁸

further from other versions). Faxian says Mahākāśyapa *should* ask: 汝應當問 etc. T376 12.865c07–08.

¹²⁴ Enumeration of chapters differs in different versions; in Faxian, which Shimoda follows, this is Chapter 6.

¹²⁵ That the term here is indeed **vajrakāya* is confirmed by Bongard-Levin’s Skt. Fragment no. 5, which preserves a colophon to this chapter: *vajrābhedakāyo nāma dvitīya skandhaḥ sam[āp]t[ah]*; we thus see that the Skt. title of the text was *Vajrābhedakāya*, “The Indestructible Adamant Body;” Bongard-Levin 1986: 24.

¹²⁶ Shimoda 2008: 11. Shimoda has long championed the opinion that the *Vajrakāya* chapter (especially in Faxian’s translation) contains material that reflects the earliest stage of composition of MPNMS. See also Shimoda 2002: 103–116.

¹²⁷ In Faxian’s reckoning, followed by Shimoda, Chapter 5. Note that Shimoda has argued that this Chapter 4/5, the “Long Life” chapter, is a later interpolation into the structure of the proto-MPNMS. Part of his grounds for this argument is that the “Adamant Body” chapter opens with discussion that he holds would naturally follow from questions asked at the end of the chapter preceding the “Long Life” chapter. See Shimoda 2006; referring to questions posed at T376 12.863a16–21, T374 12.379a13–17; =T375 12.618c19–23. This argument must be borne in mind wherever we want to speculate about the dynamics that may have led to the introduction of *vajrakāya* doctrine into the proto-MPNMS; if Shimoda is right, it would mean that the doctrines of the “Long Life” chapter could not be relevant at that stage of the text’s development. It nonetheless also seems to me that the connections I trace here between the “Long Life” and “Adamant Body” chapters are real and clear, even if they are artefacts of work by interpolators; such links are relevant to the interpretation of the resulting text as we have it in the Chinese translation, which forms an integral unit in its own right, whatever its compositional history.

¹²⁸ 云何得長壽/金剛不壞身; T375 12.619b22, Y 1:61, translation modified. Similarly, in a parable much later in the text, a group of Brahmins ask the

Chapter Five opens with the Buddha declaring to Kāśyapa:

O good man! The body of the Tathāgata is an eternal body, an indestructible body, an adamant body; it is not a body sustained by various kinds of food. That is to say, it is the Dharma Body.¹²⁹

However, Kāśyapa says that he sees no such body before him, but rather a body epitomising the Buddha's vulnerability and imminent death:

[We] see only an impermanent body, “destructible, [composed of] dust and earth, sustained by various kinds of food,” and so on.¹³⁰

The Buddha replies,

Do not say that the body of the Tathāgata is soft, can easily be broken, and is the same as that of common mortals. O good man! Know that for countless billions of *kalpas*, the body of the Tathāgata has been strong, firm, and indestructible. It is neither the body of man nor of god; it is not a body susceptible to fear; nor is it a body sustained by various kinds of food ...¹³¹

bathing Buddha, “How can one gain the body of adamant?” 云何而得金剛之身, 769b29, Y 2:660.

¹²⁹ 如來身者是常住身(Tib. *rtaḡ pa'i sku*, **nityakāya*), 不可壞身 (*mi shigs pa'i sku*, **abhedakāya*), 金剛之身(*rdo rje'i sku*, **vajrakāya*), 非雜食身(Tib. only an inexact equivalent, *sha'i sku* “a body of flesh,” as elsewhere for the same term; but cf. below n. 147), 即是法身 (*chos kyi sku*, **dharmakāya*); T375 12.622c14–16, Y 1:75; D Tha 46b5; my translation. Skt. reconstructions from Shimoda 1993: 254.

¹³⁰ 唯見無常破壞(Tib. *gzhiḡ tu ruṅ ba'i sku*, **bhedakāya*) 塵土 (*thal ba'i sku*, **rajaḡkāya*) 雜食等身 (*sha'i sku*); T375 12.622c17–18, Y 1:75; my translation; Skt. cf. Shimoda 1993: 254. This statement resonates with a very old formula for the inadequacies of the ordinary given physical body, dating back as far as the *Sāmaññaphala-sutta*: “This my body is material (*rūpī*), made up from the four great elements, born of mother and father, fed on rice and gruel, impermanent, liable to be injured and abraded, broken and destroyed, and this is my consciousness which is bound to it and dependent on it;” *ayaṃ kho me kāyo rūpī cātummahābhūṭiko mātāpettikasambhavo odana-kummāsūpacayo aniccucchādanaparimaddanabhedanaviddhaṃsanadhammo. idaṃ ca pana me viññāṇaṃ ettha sitaṃ ettha paṭibaddhanti*; DN 1:76, Walshe 1995: 104; see Radich 2007 §2.3.3. Here, doubtless 等 “and so forth” indicates the whole formula is meant.

¹³¹ 汝今莫謂如來之身不堅 (Tib. *sob sob po'i lus*) 可壞如凡夫身。善男子。

and so on, through a long paean to the marvellous qualities of the *dharmakāya* in numerous respects.¹³² Kāśyapa professes that he will “henceforth regard the Tathāgata’s body as the eternal *dharmakāya*, the body of peace and bliss (安樂之身) ... Yes, indeed, the Tathāgata’s Dharma-Body is adamant and indestructible.”¹³³ Kāśyapa then asks how this could be so, and the Buddha answers, “This adamant body¹³⁴ is perfected by keeping and upholding the true Dharma.”¹³⁵ At the end of the chapter, the Buddha summarises by declaring again that “the body of the Tathāgata is the indestructible *vajra* body;” a *bodhisattva* should practice to attain the correct view that this is the case, which will allow him to see the indestructible *vajra* body of the Buddha as clearly as he sees shapes in a mirror.¹³⁶

The notion that the Buddha possesses a *vajrakāya* also occurs outside this chapter, for example in the context of obscure glosses

汝今當知。如來之身無量億劫堅牢難壞 (Tib. *mi shigs pa'i sku*)。非人天身非恐怖身非雜食身; T375 12.622c19–21, Y 1:75; translation modified. Tib. at this point inserts an interesting assertion, playing on two different terms for “body:” “The body (*sku*) of the Tathāgata is incorporeal (*lus med pa*)” (*de bzhin gshegs pa'i sku ni lus med pa*), D Tha 46a1.

¹³² In ending this discourse, the Buddha asserts again that the body of the Tathāgatas is adamant 如來之身即金剛身, T375 12.623b01; Tib. only asserts that it is *like vajra*, *de bzhin gshegs pa'i sku rdo rje ltar*, D Tha 47a4–5.

¹³³ 我從今日當思惟如來之身是常法身安樂之身 ... 唯然世尊。如來法身金剛不壞 (*rdo rje lta bur mi shigs pa'i sku*, **vajropamābhedakāya*); T375 12.623b05–08, Y 1:77; D Tha 47a7; note that this Tib. only says the body is *like* adamant, not that it *is* adamant; cf. Shimoda 1993: 266 n. 64 (Shimoda notes a parallel in *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, Lamotte 1962: 82). In another passage in Ch., also, we find an echo of the apparently older notion that the Tathāgata’s body is merely *like vajra*; 如來之身猶真金剛 T375 12.619b15–16, Y 1:61.

¹³⁴ Tib. has only “my body” (*nga'i sku*) here, D Tha 47a7.

¹³⁵ 以能護持正法因緣故得成就是金剛身; T375 12.623b09–10, Y 1:77; my translation.

¹³⁶ T375 12.624c15–18; Y 1:83; Skt. has *vajrābhedakāya* (*sic* short “a” in *-kāya*) and then *paramārthakāya*, Matsuda 1988: 30, Habata 2007: 68; Tib. again says that this body is *like vajra*, *rdo rje ltar mi shigs pa'i sku*, D Tha 50b7. Skt. also says “like seeing *one’s own* reflection in a mirror.”

on the letters of the Sanskrit syllabary;¹³⁷ and again, in passing, at the end of the chapter on the analogy of the birds.¹³⁸ Particularly telling is the mention of *vajrakāya* in discussions of docetism;¹³⁹ it occurs during a docetic interpretation of the Buddha's apparent illness, and is there also explicitly linked to his eternity. This theme in turn is centrally related to the docetic interpretation of his apparent *parinirvāṇa* that, on one level, comprises the eponymous central theme of the entire text.¹⁴⁰ *Vajrakāya* is mentioned also quite a number of other times in *Dharmakṣema only.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ *Nirvāṇa* itself is even said to be identical with the *vajrakāya*, T375 12.653c23–654a01, Y 1:201; Tib. differs slightly, but **vajrābhedakāya* follows shortly afterwards, *de bzhin gshegs pa ni rdo rje'i sku mi phyed pa yin te*, D Tha 115bl.

¹³⁸ Here, **vajrakāya* is mentioned only in Faxian, T376 12.890a04–05; *Dharmakṣema rather has *abhedakāya* 不破壞身 T375 12.656c07; T 1:213; Tib. does not mention the body at all.

¹³⁹ In *Dharmakṣema only, this link is stronger. Immediately after the comparison of the two offerings (see n. 141 below), the text explicitly explains that the apparent earthly body of the Buddha is a docetic illusion: “Through innumerable, limitless *asaṃkhyeyas* of *kalpas*, the Tathāgata has already not had a body [nourished by] food, a body afflicted by the afflictions. [He has rather] an infinite body, an eternal body, a *dharmakāya*, an adamant body,” 如來已於無量無邊阿僧祇劫。無有食身煩惱之身 etc. T375 12.611c21–23ff., Y 1:31–32. The Buddha then goes on further to give a docetic interpretation of his acceptance of food offerings and his apparent ingestion of food.

¹⁴⁰ 是金剛身云何無常 etc. T375 12.632b25–27; Y 1:116; Tib. *sku rdo rje ltar mkhregs pa mi rtag par ga la zhig 'gyur te* D Tha 70a3. There can be no death for the Tathāgata, since death means the breakup of the body; thus the Tathāgata is “deathless” (**amṛta/amata*). This is explained (via the *tertium quid* of “true emancipation,” which is here being glossed as identical to the Tathāgata) with the analogy of a precious pot made of adamant (金剛寶瓶, **vajraratnaghata*?); whereas normal pots can be shattered, cracked by fire, etc., such a pot is absolutely indestructible; T375 12.633a02–09, Y 1:118. The message is also linked to docetism, especially to the doctrine that the Tathāgata's body is not defiled by the womb. It is notable, in this regard, that MPNMS incorporates significant portions of text recognisably derivative of LAN; see e.g. T375 12.628b27–62916, Y 1:101ff.; more broadly, several central chapters in the longer *Dharmakṣema version are about docetic interpretations of the Buddha's apparent illness, etc.

¹⁴¹ Some such passages are possible later interpolations in originally earlier layers of the text. For example, the text argues that the merits of the offering

The *vajrakāya* is also related to broader uses of the notion of *vajra* in the text, which links it to many of the *sūtra*'s major themes. In keeping with the equivalence MPNMS draws between buddha-nature and the Tathāgata himself (i.e. full-blown buddha-hood), buddha-nature is said to be like an adamant layer of bedrock below the ordinary earth, which cannot be broken or dug up, nor destroyed by sword or axe.¹⁴² *Vajra* (though not the *vajrakāya per*

made by Cuṇḍa before the Parinirvāṇa is vastly superior to that made by Sujātā before the attainment of *bodhi*, and one reason given is that the former was received by “the body of defilement, sustained by various types of food, the final (limited) body, which is an impermanent body;” the latter, however, is received by “the body free of defilements, the *vajrakāya*, the *dharmakāya*, the infinite body;” T375 12.611c09–12; Y 1:31 (this entire portion of the text is missing in Faxian and Tib., and though parts of the surrounding text match Habata’s Sanskrit Fragment 5, Habata 2007: 27–33, this particular passage does not appear there either). **Vajrakāya* is also mentioned in giving a doctestic explanation of apparent sickness and eating (once more missing in corresponding Faxian and Tib.), T375 12.669a21–23; Y 1:261 (Yamamoto mistakenly translates “Adamantine Mind”). In unparalleled passages from the *Dharmakṣema text, one of the things the *bodhisattva* knows by his wisdom is that “the Tathāgata certainly never enters into *nirvāṇa*; the Tathāgata’s body is adamant and indestructible, and is not a body constituted by defilements; neither is it a stinking, corruptible body,” T375 12.704c09–13, Y 2:402. The “stinking, corruptible body” here recalls the *pūtikāya* of the Nikāyas, e.g. the *Vakkali-sutta*; SN 3:120, Bodhi 2000: 939; Radich 2007 §3.2.6. *Vajrakāya* is used as an interesting example of what is meant by the formula “originally did exist,” “originally did not exist” etc. (本有, 本無), T375 12.707b07–13, Y 2:413; 707b27–28, Y 2:413. The Tathāgata’s adamant body is characterised by the marks, and the result of aeons of good practice; T375 12.712c01–06, Y 2:433 (Yamamoto omits to translate the word 金剛之身). The *bodhisattva* attains a “body like adamant and a mind like space” 身如金剛心如虛空, T375 12.744a01–05, Y 2:555. The *bodhisattva* will “discard this body, which is not sturdy, and obtain the *vajrakāya*,” T375 12.692c16–20, Y 2:354–355.

¹⁴² T375 12.649c17–25, Y 1:186; D Tha 106b3–4. Again, this association is much stronger in parts of the text unique to the *Dharmakṣema line. buddha-nature is directly associated with the *vajrakāya* when the text is explaining that buddha-nature is both material and non-material (*rūpya*, *ārūpya*), T375 12.770b25–26, Y 2:664. The *vajrakāya* is also implicitly associated with *tathāgatagarbha*/buddha-nature as characterised by the “four inversions” 常樂我淨, T375 12.791b09–16, Y 2:749; T375 12.747a27–29, Y 2:567. The *vajrakāya* with the thirty-two major and eighty minor marks is identified with buddha-nature, T375 12.819a15–22, Y 3:863.

se) is also associated with MPNMS itself. One of the claims the MPNMS makes about its own virtues as a text is that the “ground” and the people wherever the MPNMS is disseminated are adamant or like adamant.¹⁴³ Elsewhere the *sūtra* says of itself that it is like a *vajra* treasure, perfect and without blemish.¹⁴⁴

Thus, the trope of adamant more generally, and especially the adamant body of the Tathāgata, is one device by which MPNMS conveys its central teachings that the Buddha is eternal and indestructible; that there is a similarly eternal core of potential buddhahood in every sentient being; that the apparent demise of the Buddha is therefore merely a docetistic show. MPNMS thus identifies the absolute immortality of the universal Buddha with a particular understanding of his embodiments. The apparently earthly body, about to die in the *mise-en-scène* of the text, is merely a docetistic show; the Buddha’s *true* embodiment is the *dharmakāya*; and this *dharmakāya* is an “adamant body” (**vajrakāya*) and utterly indestructible. Thus, the notion of *vajrakāya* is elaborated at some length in MPNMS, in close organic connection with other central themes of the text, in a chapter which may be the heart of the work.

This connection can be traced further afield in the larger corpus of *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* texts. Perhaps most significantly, the version of MPNMS contained in Saṃghadeva’s **Ekottarikāgama* T125 (EA)¹⁴⁵ proclaims that despite the brevity of Śākyamuni’s life,

¹⁴³ T375 12.638c25–27, Y 1:141, D Tha 83a5–6 (in Tib. it is clear that the “ground” is a “stage” of practice).

¹⁴⁴ 是經 ... 金剛寶藏滿足無缺 T375 12.624c26–28, Y 1:85; Skt. is slightly different, *idaṃ sūtram ... vajrākāranityākhyāḥ*, Bongard-Levin 1986: 24; D Tha 51a3–4. Similarly, in portions of the text unique to the **Dharmakṣema* line, MPNMS itself is also likened to *vajra* and said to be indestructible; and it is likened to an axe of *vajra* that cuts the trees of all defilements; T375 12.834a09–10, Y 3:926; 834b12–13, Y 3:928. This self-promotion, and more generally, the identification of the text itself with its doctrinal contents and all their benefits and powers, is of course part of a broader recurrent theme that might be called the theme of the “cult of the book,” but in a sense looser than that classically given to it by Schopen. See Schopen 1975; Drewes 2007.

¹⁴⁵ This may be only part of a much larger web of connections between the Mahāyāna MPNMS and EA; Radich 2011: 164–166.

the *dharma* will endure even after the passing of his fleshly body, and this is related to the indestructibility of the *dharmakāya*.¹⁴⁶ In a further passage, the same text adds that the Buddha's life is "extremely long" precisely because it is only his "fleshly body" that enters *nirvāṇa*, while the *dharmakāya* survives.¹⁴⁷ Elsewhere, the text then links the endurance of the Buddha in the world to his body:

The body of the Tathāgata is akin to adamant (金剛之數).¹⁴⁸ It is my will that this body be ground up [into grains as small] as mustard seeds, and spread throughout the worlds (ages), in order that in future times, believing donors will still be able to make offerings even without seeing the bodily form (**rūpa*) of the Tathāgata.¹⁴⁹

Elsewhere, the text proclaims that "the body of the Tathāgata is made of adamant 如來體者金剛所成," before associating it with the ten powers and the four "confidences," which are included in the *āveṇikadharmas* (qualities unique to a Buddha), often identified with the *dharmakāya*.¹⁵⁰ Again, the text states that the body of the Buddhas is like adamant 諸佛形體皆金剛數, and therefore exempt from age, sickness and death.¹⁵¹ Elsewhere, however, even this adamantine body (explicitly identified with the relics, called "mustard-seed body [bodies?]" 芥子之體) is said to be ultimately mutable, a fact which is supposed to drive home the much greater

¹⁴⁶ 釋師出世壽極短/ 肉體雖逝法身在, T125 2.549c14; ... 如來法身不敗壞/ 永存於世不斷絕, 550a01–02.

¹⁴⁷ 我釋迦文佛壽命極長。所以然者。肉身(cf. *sha'i sku*, above n. 129) 雖取滅度。法身存在, T125 2.787b27–28. These EA passages cited in Demiéville 1929: 176.

¹⁴⁸ 金剛之數 might also be translated clumsily "is of the category of adamant;" 數 *shū* here has the sense of "count as," "be counted among," 算在數內 (s.v. *Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大辭典).

¹⁴⁹ T125 2.751a11–14, cited in Demiéville 1929: 176; translated and discussed in Shimoda 1997: 77.

¹⁵⁰ The text immediately goes on to discuss the Tathāgata's perfect and immutable appearance, which is brought to completion by the practice of virtue, and is also "indestructible like adamant," T125 2.554a23–26.

¹⁵¹ T125 2.637b20–21.

impermanence of ordinary bodies.¹⁵²

These EA passages are particularly significant given that they come from a text in the broader *Mahāparinirvāṇa* corpus, and thus are related to MPNMS itself. We can trace this pattern of relation even further in our materials. Shimoda has noted that this EA text also generally agrees with the *Lishi yi shan jing* T135 (*Lishi*).¹⁵³ However, as we already saw briefly above (p. 254), in *Lishi* the Buddha's body that is like adamant is *not* coupled with his corporeal permanence, but impermanence rather claims the victory over him. It is thus of special interest that in both *Lishi* and EA, a key moment in the plot (indeed, its culmination in the short *Lishi*) is the division of the Buddha's diamond-like body into multiple *relics*, and their distribution throughout the world to secure the continuity of the Buddha's power (presence, teachings) in the world.¹⁵⁴ Thus, the passage in the Mahāyāna MPNMS, discussed above, stands in the overall textual development of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* corpus as a moment at which the strictly adamant "body" (*vajrakāya*) equated with the *dharmakāya* is substituted for the physical *relics* ("bodies," *śarīrāṇi*) of the Buddha, as the primary form in which buddhahood overcomes the power of impermanence to endure in the world. I will return to this important link between *vajrakāya* and *relics* in my concluding remarks below.

This link between longevity or immortality and embodiment is also found in many other texts from the same period. A complex of very similar ideas is also found in the *Mahāmegha-sūtra* T387, also translated by *Dharmakṣema – unsurprisingly, given the extremely close links between the *Mahāmegha* and MPNMS.¹⁵⁵ The body of

¹⁵² 如來金剛之身不久亦當取般涅槃。何況我身, T125 2.640b20–25.

¹⁵³ More precisely, *Lishi yi shan jing* contains only some episodes of a more complete plot found in EA; Shimoda 2008. See also Shimoda 1997: 77.

¹⁵⁴ In *Lishi*, see esp. T135 2.859a24–b01. See further the way Shimoda (2008) pursues interesting variations on this theme through the larger *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* corpus, and a related struggle over whether the Buddha's presence in the world is divisible or indivisible.

¹⁵⁵ The most painstaking work published to date on the stratification of MPNMS, Shimoda 1997, has proposed that the composition of the text proceeded in three main phases: (1) Ch. 1–7 in Faxian's text, excepting the

the Tathāgata is said to be like adamant,¹⁵⁶ and also to simply be of adamant and indestructible.¹⁵⁷ Other passages give more detail about the complex doctrine of multiple buddha-bodies held by the text. In one passage, the Buddha is asked how aspirants can attain the “adamant *dharmā* body” (金剛法身 **vajradharmakāya*); the same list of questions also asks about the “true birth body and true *dharmā* body” 真實生身, 真實法身 of the Tathāgata, his **vajrakāya* 金剛之身, and his “destructible gross body” 破壞雜身.¹⁵⁸ A more lengthy description of the true nature of the Buddha’s body states,

The Tathāgata’s *dharmakāya* is not a fleshly body; the Buddha’s body is of adamant, and is not a destructible body; [it is] brought to perfection by countless meritorious acts. The body of expedient means is not a body nourished by food.¹⁵⁹ How can such a body be said to “become extinct”?¹⁶⁰

“Longevity” chapter (Ch. 5), i.e. T376 12.853a07–863b20, 866a15–868a17; (2) Ch. 8 only in Faxian, i.e. T376 12.868a25–875c21; (3) Faxian’s Ch. 5, “Longevity,” i.e. T376 12.863b22–866a14, and Ch. 9 onwards, i.e. 875c29–end. Building on this analysis, Suzuki has proposed that the two later strata bear the mark of recomposition under the influence of the *Mahāmegha-sūtra*; Suzuki 2001: 34–38. If correct, this analysis means that the “*Vajrakāya*” chapter of MPNMS precedes the *Mahāmegha*, but not the “Longevity” chapter, so that chronological priority between the two texts is difficult to decide for the complex of ideas that concerns us here as a whole. Apparently equivalents of *vajrakāya* are found in all of Shimoda’s MPNMS layers, however, so that on Shimoda and Suzuki’s theories, *vajrakāya* would be in MPNMS before the composition of the *Mahāmegha*. According to Suzuki, “the discourse on *buddhakāya* [in the *Mahāmegha*] is almost identical with that in Chapter 6 of MPNMS (i.e. the *Vajrakāya* chapter), with almost the same passages shared by both *sūtras*.”

¹⁵⁶ 其身如金剛, T387 12.1091b01–04.

¹⁵⁷ 如來大醫王/金剛身不壞, T387 12.1089a03.

¹⁵⁸ T387 12.1081a19–20, 1081a22–25. On the “birth body,” which is a relatively unusual way of characterising the Buddha’s ordinary earthly body, but probably the most orthodox understanding of that body in the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma corpus, see Radich 2007: Ch. 4.4, and 2009. The 破壞雜身 is probably related to old formulae like that given above in n. 130.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. also T387 12.1099a02–07.

¹⁶⁰ 如來法身不名肉身。佛身金剛非破壞身。成就具足無量功德。方便之身不名食身。如是之身云何言滅, T387 12.1098c22–25.

Because the *vajrakāya* is the true body of the Tathāgata, and is indestructible, there is actually no such thing as relics; this is connected (as in the *Golden Light Sūtra*; see below) to the fact that the Tathāgata's real body actually has no such things as bones and blood, either.¹⁶¹ As in MPNMS, the text also promises that other “sentient beings” who uphold the text itself, recite it, copy it etc. will themselves obtain the *vajrakāya*.¹⁶²

We also find this motif in even more texts from the same stratum in the Chinese textual record. In the *Golden Light Sūtra* (like MPNMS and the *Mahāmegha*, translated by *Dharmakṣema), the doctrine of the Buddha's infinite lifespan is linked to a denial of the reality of relics (*dhātu*), which are shown to be a mere expedient. There can be no relic where the body has no real bone or blood,¹⁶³ and the body of the Tathāgata is not of such a nature:

His body, which is a mass of adamant, manifests [another] body by magical transformation¹⁶⁴ ... the body of the Law (*dharmakāya*) is the one fully enlightened; the element of *dharma* (*dharmadhātu*) is the Tathāgata. Such is the Lord's body; such the exposition of the Law.¹⁶⁵

In closing, the chapter draws this link between the eternity of the Buddha's lifespan and the nature of his embodiment more tightly still: “The Buddha does not enter complete Nirvāṇa (and) the Law does not disappear ... The Tathāgata has an eternal body.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ T387 12.1097a18–21.

¹⁶² 當知是人得金剛身 etc., T387 12.1094b18–21. On similar ideas in MPNMS, see n. 144.

¹⁶³ *anasthirudhire kāye kuto dhātur bhaviṣyati*; Emmerick 1970: 6–7, Nobel 1937: 18.

¹⁶⁴ It is difficult to convey this arcane idea clearly in English, but the point is clearly that *the adamant body* (presumably meaning the Buddha *qua* such a body) makes a show of the apparent ordinary body by means of magical power (*nir/mā*).

¹⁶⁵ *vajrasaṃghananakāyo nirmitaṃ kāyaṃ darśayet/ ... dharmakāyo hi saṃbuddho dharmadhātus tathāgataḥ/ idr̥ṣo bhagavatkāya idr̥ṣī dharmadeśanā*; Emmerick 1970: 7–8, Nobel 1937: 18 (translation modified). Note the association of the *dharmakāya* with the *dharmadeśanā*, which is, common opinion notwithstanding, otherwise relatively rare.

¹⁶⁶ *na buddhaḥ parinirvāti na dharmāḥ parihīyate/ ... nityakāyas tathāga-*

Again, Buddhahadra's *Avataṃsaka* explains that the Buddha's body *and* life-force are impervious to all manner of hyperbolic threats: e.g. even if all the sentient beings in the entire cosmos were to rain *vajra* down upon his body, the Buddha would be utterly fearless, and the threat would "not raise even a single hair" on him.¹⁶⁷ Elsewhere in the text, a perfect indestructible body like adamant and infinite life are listed together as gifts of those born into the clan of the Buddha.¹⁶⁸ Kumārajīva, explicating the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*, comments that there are three kinds of *dharmakāya*, and one of them is the *vajrakāya*.¹⁶⁹ In this same period, the "adamant body" is also inserted into the *Sukhāvativyūhasūtras*, a key context for the idea of extreme longevity or immortality. The early fifth-century "Saṃghavarman" version of the "long" *sūtra*¹⁷⁰ states that *bodhisattvas* in Amitābha's land will have "the adamant body of Nārāyaṇa 金剛那羅延身."¹⁷¹ Nothing equivalent is found in the earlier versions of the text.¹⁷² An adamant body is also attributed to the Buddha in a verse uttered by a nameless monk in a *Dīrghāgama* account of the Tathāgata's *parinirvāṇa*;¹⁷³

tah; Emmerick 1970: 8, Nobel 1937: 19. In the Chinese translation record, however, it is not until Yijing 義淨 (635–713) that the Buddha's body here has become an adamant body, 獲此最勝金剛身; T665 16.444c16; 世尊金剛體/權現於化身; 406c09; no such notion is mentioned in *Dharmakṣema's T663, or the mixed translation T664.

¹⁶⁷ T278 9.597c26–598a08.

¹⁶⁸ T278 9.704b03–08. cf. also 513a24–b7; 518b04–05.

¹⁶⁹ In the *Zhu Weimojie jing* 注維摩詰經: "[The root text reads:] 'Ānanda, you should know that the Buddha has dharma for his body;' Kumārajīva says: 'There are three kinds of *dharmakāya*. (1) The body produced from the *dharmakāya* by magical transformation 法化生身; this is the *vajrakāya*. (2) The fivefold *dharmakāya*. (3) The true aspect of all *dharmas* in their totality comprise buddhahood, and thus the true aspect [of all *dharmas*] is also called *dharmakāya*;' T1775 38.359c19–22.

¹⁷⁰ See n. 36.

¹⁷¹ See e.g. Gómez 1996: 169; T360 12.268b23–24.

¹⁷² This is part of a larger pattern, in which several vows from the later "standard" list are missing from earlier versions; Gómez 1996: 129.

¹⁷³ 佛得金剛身/猶為無常壞/諸佛金剛體/皆亦歸無常, T1 1.27b11–14, translated by Buddhayaśas and Zhu Fonian ca. 408–412, *Hōbōgirin* 238; naturally

in Guṇabhadra's *Samyuktāgama*;¹⁷⁴ in Kumārajīva's *Lotus*;¹⁷⁵ in Kumārajīva's *Pañca*;¹⁷⁶ and in Buddhaśānta's **Daśadharmaka*.¹⁷⁷

In sum, in a large number of Chinese translations from the decades around 400 C.E., we see the sudden emergence of a new twist on the idea that the Buddha's body is *like* adamant, and texts begin saying that he *has* an "adamant body" (**vajrakāya*). As we have seen, this is the same period in which we also see the sudden new emergence of the claim that despite appearances, Śākyamuni himself was extremely long-lived or immortal. Finally, in the same period and often in the same texts, the Buddha's longevity or immortality is explicitly linked to various ideas about the special nature of his body, including the idea of **vajrakāya*.

Conclusions and implications

In this paper, I have shown that through a long process, the idea emerged by the fourth century at the latest that the Buddha was immortal, and embodied in an absolutely permanent and indestructible body of adamant. From the perspective of a certain understanding of the basic nature of Buddhism, the concept of an immortal Buddha might be regarded as an aberration. Many scholars have admired Buddhism for its "consistency" in including the Buddha and the Dharma under the basic teaching of impermanence – for

enough, nothing corresponding to this verse occurs in the Pāli versions of the text. In text corresponding to DN 26 *Cakkavattisihanāda-sutta*, *Dīrghāgama* has the Buddha promise monks long life as one of the fruits of practice leading to the attainment of the five superpowers, 42a27–b01.

¹⁷⁴ 汝見金剛身/我師無壽匹 etc.; T99 2.167b03–05; Guṇabhadra arrived in Canton in 435, *Hōbōgin* 252.

¹⁷⁵ 應以執金剛身得度者。即現執金剛身而為說法; T262 9.57b17–19. Note that this **vajrakāya* is missing from Dharmarakṣa's earlier translation.

¹⁷⁶ 入金剛三昧中。碎金剛身作末舍利, T223 8.293b06–10. The same notion is also found in Xuanzang's *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, T220 5.165c03, 708c30. Here, the idea of "smashing [the *vajrakāya*] to smithereens" is expressed as "smashing it into tiny relics" (舍利, *śarīra*), which seems to be connected to the idea of relics as adamantine; see above pp. 249–250.

¹⁷⁷ T310(9) 10.155b12–15. Buddhaśānta was active in 525–539 in Luoyang and Ye, *Hōbōgin* 238.

holding that even Buddhas die, and even the Dharma ultimately fades away. However, in a broad, long-term perspective, the developments traced here have a good deal of internal logic, and are not mere aberrations. The immortal permanence and adamant body of the Buddha are best understood as part of the larger history of ideas about the Buddha's embodiments.

Even in earliest Buddhism, the concept of the “undying” (*amṛta*) was an important aspect of the conceptualisation of the religious ideal. As I have argued elsewhere, this concept was connected with a range of other respects in which early Buddhism figured itself as the conquest or evasion of death. Moreover, the ideal of the undying is arguably predicated on an implicit critique of the ordinary body, and the realisation of this ideal of undying was often associated with disidentification from the given, fleshly body. Also in Pāli materials, beings in spatially or temporally remote reaches of the cosmos are already understood to have much longer lifespans than beings of our world. In this connection, we first see the use of elaborate analogies to convey the mind-bending scale of long lifespans, which analogies were later used for Buddhas and beings in their buddha-lands. The Pāli canon also claims that the Buddha has his lifespan under voluntary control, and could “live for a *kalpa* or more than a *kalpa*,” and that the Buddha chooses the moment of his own death. These ideas continued in later texts.

In the development of the ideas studied here, ideas about relics (*śarīrāṇi*, “bodies”) seem to occupy a potentially important place, but one difficult of analysis due to the scant and difficult nature of the evidence. We can say, at least, that relics were widely characterised as adamant or like adamant (**vajrasaṃghana* etc.). The Senavarma Inscription also refers to the relic as the “undying relic/element” (**amṛtadhātu*). The same inscription, and various other sources, commonly claim that the relic contains or is animated by the essential qualities of buddhahood, including pivotally five “pure aggregates.” These and similar factors suggest that relics, as “bodies” in which buddhahood is presented in the world after the physical death of the Buddha, may have been an important parallel or even predecessor to other ideas about long-lived or immortal (“undying”) Buddhas embodied in adamant.

Turning to the post-Pāli-canonical textual record, already in Lokakṣema, Buddhas in distant worlds are inordinately long-lived. Mind-boggling analogies expressing vast stretches of time are applied to the lifespans of cosmically remote Buddhas (and Lokakṣema's Mahāsthāmaprāpta-become-Buddha may already be completely exempt from *parinirvāṇa* and immortal). This newfound longevity of the Buddhas may in part have been allowed by the development of cosmically remote buddha-worlds.¹⁷⁸ However, a tension apparently persists between inordinately long lifespan and *parinirvāṇa*, and eventually one side gives way. By Dharmarakṣa (third century), *parinirvāṇa* is reinterpreted in docetistic terms.

The connection to docetistic Buddhology points us to other important connections. I have argued elsewhere¹⁷⁹ that docetistic Buddhism probably emerged in conjunction with nascent, as yet unnamed developments that ultimately coalesce under the term *dharmakāya*. Broadly speaking, docetism about the Buddha's earthly life can be linked to a kind of "metaphysical docetism," that is, the Mahāyāna claim that the entire world is not as it seems either.¹⁸⁰ More specifically, docetism about the Buddha's final lifetime and body is an answer to the question: "If the Buddha is most veritably embodied in his gnosis (*prajñāpāramitā*, *sarvajñatā* etc.)/ its object (*dharmā*, *dharmatā*, *dharmadhātu*, *tathatā*), what was that apparent body in which he walked around the Gangetic Plain?"

The emergent Mahāyāna "absolute" carried from soon after the outset strong and logical overtones of immutability, stasis, self-identity, permanence and related qualities (articulated most vividly, but not exclusively, in the Tathāgatagarbha tradition). It is a short step from the notion that the Buddha is identical with this "absolute" (*dharmatā*, *dharmadhātu*, *tathatā*) to the notion that he also must in truth be immutable, static, self-identical – and indeed permanent. Indeed, around the same time as the docetic interpretation

¹⁷⁸ See Nattier 2003: 183–186.

¹⁷⁹ Radich 2007: Ch. 4.2, esp. §4.2.8 and §4.2.9.

¹⁸⁰ I am referring here to claims, associated especially closely with *Prajñāpāramitā*, that the phenomenal world is illusory (connected to the doctrine of emptiness), and that the only reality is the Mahāyāna "absolute" variously conceived (*dharmadhātu*, *dharmatā*, Thusness etc.).

of the *parinirvāṇa* emerges, actual immortality is attributed at least to cosmically remote Buddhas. It is also not coincidental, I believe, that in roughly the same layer of our record, we see the emergence of the notion of the *dharmakāya* so-named, i.e. the explicit articulation of the Buddha's full identity with the "absolute."¹⁸¹

Where such qualities are ascribed to cosmically remote Buddhas, it is difficult to imagine that they could have endured for long without being applied to Śākyamuni as well. Otherwise other Buddhas would be better than our Buddha, and such a proposition is fundamentally at odds with the notion that all Buddhas are ultimately identical (in virtue of their identity with the "absolute"). It should thus not surprise us that these ideas are already applied to Śākyamuni in Dharmarakṣa, in the *Lotus*. These ideas are exceptional in Dharmarakṣa's period, but by the fourth century, the idea that Śākyamuni is immortal is suddenly found in many texts.

Alongside this trajectory, which leads to common acceptance of the idea that Buddhas including Śākyamuni are immortal, we see the gradual coalescence of the closely related idea that the Buddha's body is adamant (*vajrakāya*), which I contend must be understood against the background sketched above. We saw that this idea develops in two stages. First, as early as Lokakṣema, the body of the Buddha is *like* adamant. At this stage this trope is used in a variety of connections to emphasise the Buddha's strength, purity, immunity to physical harm, and identity with the "absolute;" I have been unable to find direct connections with any particular doctrine about his lifespan. In the next stage, represented most strikingly by MPNMS, the body is *of* adamant, and the trope comes to express the immortality of the Buddha. In related developments, some texts state that it is the *dharmakāya* that is made of adamant, that is

¹⁸¹ See Radich 2007 §4.5.2. I there note mention of the *dharmakāya* in Nāgārjuna's *Ratnāvalī*. I argue that in the Chinese record, however, the earliest clear and datable instance of the idea of the *dharmakāya*, named as such and with the clear Mahāyāna content relevant here, is in Zhi Qian's *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*. Very soon thereafter, in Dharmarakṣa, we see this concept suddenly widely attested in a broad range of texts. We have seen here that the docetic interpretation of the *parinirvāṇa* and the immortality of the Buddhas also emerges in Dharmarakṣa.

immortal, etc.

It is worth pausing to consider another broader context for the assertion that the Buddha's body is of adamant. I have already noted above that the idea of adamant seems to connect *vajrakāya* discourse with ideas about relics. In another direction, it is also relevant for us to consider the possible relations between the "body like adamant" or the "body of adamant" and various terms for adamantine states *of mind* in Buddhist doctrine. Full study of this problem would require an independent careful study, but even a few preliminary observations are suggestive.

The term *vajira* itself is relatively uncommon in the Pāli canon,¹⁸² and in most cases, is used either to refer to diamond, sometimes as a substance that can cut all other substances;¹⁸³ or to the special throwing weapon of deities like Indra and Vajirapāni.¹⁸⁴ This double set of associations is unsurprising, both being common in the use of the word *vajira/vajra* in Indic languages and contexts. However, most significantly for our purposes, even this early, Buddhist texts already describe certain types of mind or mental state in terms of adamant. In the *Apadāna, samādhi* (in general) is said to be like adamant;¹⁸⁵ and a passage found in both AN and the *Puggalapaññatti* of the Abhidhamma describes a "person with

¹⁸² *Vajrakāya* (= Skt. *vajrakāya*) does not appear at all in the Pāli canon. The notion of *vajra*, of course, had a long pre-history, reaching back to the *Ṛgveda*. See Apte 1956: 292–295; Schlerath 1975; Rau 1976; Schlerath 1977; Das Gupta 1975.

¹⁸³ *Dhammapada* PTS 24, v. 161, Norman 2004: 24; paralleled in *Nettipakkaraṇa* PTS 183, Ñāṇamoli 1962: 239. *Milindapaṇha* PTS 267, Rhys Davids 1963: 102; again (as irresistible cutter), PTS 278, Rhys Davids 1963: 2:119.

¹⁸⁴ In MN 35, *Cūlasaccaka-sutta*, the Buddha and Saccaka Nigaṇṭhaputta enter into dispute, and the *vajira*-wielding *yakṣa* Vajirapāni appears above Saccaka Nigaṇṭhaputta's head, holding a *vajira*, and says he will split his head into seven pieces if he cannot answer the Buddha's challenge; PTS 231, Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 1995: 326. A similar scene unfolds between the Buddha and Ambaṭṭha in the *Ambaṭṭha-sutta* DN 3, DN 1:94–95, Walshe 1995: 115–116. However, on this occasion Vajirapāni is holding an "iron club" (*ayokūṭa*). Similarly, Indra's hand is referred to as *vajirahattha*, DN 1:239, Walshe 318.

¹⁸⁵ *Sīlaṃ tassa asaṅkheyyaṃ, samādhi vajirūpamo;/ asaṅkheyyaṃ nāṇavaraṃ, vimutti ca anopamā*, PTS 2:492.

a mind like a diamond” (*vajirūpamacitto puggalo*; Pāli *vajirūpama* = Skt. *vajropama*), associating the attainment of this type of mind with the destruction of the “outflows” (*āsava/āsrava*) and complete liberation.¹⁸⁶ In *Peṭakopadesa* v. 368, the mind of one who is free of lust (i.e. the Non-Returner), which state allows freedom from further rebirth, is compared to *vajira*, but here, seemingly, in the sense of a bolt of lightning (which falls on a log or tree and splits or burns it).¹⁸⁷

Variations on these early ideas then continue to occur through a range of post-Pāli-canonical texts, where we see various ideas about mind, special gnosis, or states of mind that are “adamant.” Using the same yardstick used in this paper for body concepts as evidenced by the Chinese canon, some of these adamant kinds of mind seem likely to have emerged approximately in tandem with the notion of *vajrakāya*. For example, **vajracitta* 金剛心 occurs rarely in Dharmarakṣa,¹⁸⁸ and then more frequently in translators around the time *vajrakāya* emerges, i.e. around 400 (Zhu Fonian, **Dharmakṣema*, *Buddhabhadra*, etc.).¹⁸⁹ Also around 400, we seem

¹⁸⁶ This person, “by the destruction of the *āsavas* (‘outflows’), himself in this very life (*diṭṭheva dhamme*) comes to know thoroughly the release of the mind, the release by insight which is freed from the *āsavas*, and having obtained it abides therein. Just as, monks, there is nothing, whether gem or rock, which a diamond (*vajira* = *vajra*) cannot cut, even so [he is liberated; presumably meaning there is no obstacle to liberation his mind cannot ‘cut’ through];” AN PTS 1:124; translation slightly modified from Woodward and Hare 1995: 1:106–107; see also Nyanaponika and Bodhi 1999: 48; “Pugga-lapaññatti” of the *Abhidhamma*, PTS 30; Law 1997: 44.

¹⁸⁷ *Peṭakopadesa* PTS 99, Ñāṇamoli 1964: 133–134. The precise sense of the simile here seems difficult to understand; the text seems to speak of a “cold” lightning-bolt.

¹⁸⁸ In *Pañca*: 是為菩薩摩訶薩發金剛心, T222 8.180c14–15; 菩薩摩訶薩發金剛心 180c27; and in the **Lokottara(parivarta)-sūtra* (where the mind is like adamant): 其心如金剛 T292 10.621a20. The term also occurs once in a text ascribed to Zhi Qian (but Nattier [2008] does not consider the ascription accurate, T530 14.807a23).

¹⁸⁹ E.g. *Dharmapada*/**Udānavarga* T212 4.628c11; 最勝問菩薩十住除垢斷結經 T309 10.996b08–09; *Buddhacarita* T192 4.45a16; *Gaṇagañja-paripṛcchā* T397(8) 13.104b06–07; ten kinds of “giving rise to **vajracitta* to adorn the Great Vehicle,” *Buddhāvataṃsaka* T278 9.645a17–646a03; etc.

to see the emergence of an idea of **vajrajñāna* 金剛智.¹⁹⁰

However, the concept that seems most significant in this regard is that of a *samādhi* like or of adamant. We have already seen above that in Mātṛceta and Chinese texts from MPPU onwards, this *samādhi* is closely connected with adamant relics by the conceit that the Buddha enters into it in order to produce his relics.¹⁹¹ On its own, however, the term *vajropamasamādhi*, by the yardstick used here, seems likely to be earlier than comparable body concepts. A **vajrasamādhi*, translated 金剛三昧 (without explicit mention of “likeness”) is already mentioned once in Lokakṣema.¹⁹² The same term also occurs quite plentifully in Dharmarakṣa.¹⁹³ Around the same time as the emergence of *vajrakāya* proper, we find this same term more plentifully, for instance in EA,¹⁹⁴ the translations of **Dharmakṣema*,¹⁹⁵ and Zhu Fonian.¹⁹⁶ This same **vajrasamādhi*, it

¹⁹⁰ E.g. *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka* T157 3.188c19–189a21 (etc.); *Buddhacarita* T192 4.3b13, 52b03; 僧伽羅刹所集經 T194 4.115c12–13; a number of times scattered through Buddhahadra’s *Buddhāvataṃsaka* T278; MPNMS T375 12.721a13; etc.

¹⁹¹ See above pp. 249–250.

¹⁹² T624 15.355a05; Nattier (2008: 85) lists this as a “third tier” Lokakṣema text.

¹⁹³ Especially in his *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka*, T157 3.209c14–18, 220c08–09, 221b13–14; Mokṣala’s *Pañca*, where it is associated with *āveṇikadharmas*, T221 8.09b22–24; where the Tathāgata enters into this *samādhi* in order to smash his body into numerous relics the size of mustard seeds for sons and daughters of good family to worship, 53c22–27; where it is listed among the defining criteria that make a Buddha, along with attainment of the *āveṇikadharmas* etc., 136a7–11; similarly at 138b19–23; see also 13a06, 16b09, 19b25–26, 23b28–29, 24a12–13, 118a17–18, 123a28, 124c20, 146b22. Also in Dharmarakṣa’s *Pañca*, T222 8.181b03–08, 190c25–27; in Dharmarakṣa’s T378 12.916a01.

¹⁹⁴ See esp. EA T125:2.793b13–c08 (this text is apparently unmatched in other Mainstream canons).

¹⁹⁵ For instance, there is a long exposition of a **vajrasamādhi* in portions of MPNMS unique to **Dharmakṣema* and derived texts, T375 12.753a25–754b02; also in the exposition of the difference between the two offerings of Cuṇḍa and Sujātā, which seems to be an interpolation in **Dharmakṣema* only, 611c23–612a02. See also e.g. the *Mahāmegha* by **Dharmakṣema*, where a *bodhisattva* named “Wordless” enters into the *samādhi* and transforms the

seems, is also translated *jin'gangding* 金剛定, and this translation is also found in Dharmarakṣa,¹⁹⁷ and then more plentifully in translators around 400.¹⁹⁸

Most of the time in these texts, there is no explicit mention of these *samādhis* being “like” adamant; in contrast to the trajectory traced by body concepts, the assertion seems to be made straight away that they simply *are* of adamant. It might seem that this appearance may in part be an artifact of translation, as the translation *jin'gangyuding* 金剛喻定 (*vajropamasamādhi*, “*samādhi* like adamant”) does not seem to appear until Xuanzang. However, even prior to Xuanzang, the translation *jin'gangyusanmei* 金剛喻三昧 does appear, but only rarely. It features three times in a single Dharmarakṣa text, his *Pañca*.¹⁹⁹ It also features once each in **Ūrdhvaśūnya* and in the anonymous *Tathāgatagaṇajñānācintyaviśayāvatāra-nirdeśa*, but in these contexts it is listed *alongside* a plain **vajrasamādhi*, suggesting that the two were, sometimes at least, conceived of as different states.²⁰⁰

Perhaps the most seminal exposition of this important concept of “*samādhi* like adamant” is found in various parts of Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa* and *Bhāṣya* (which of course dates to around the same period, ca. 400, although it was not translated into Chinese until later). In AKBh’s elaborate analysis of the detailed process by which buddhahood is attained, this *samādhi* is intimately linked

entire world into *vajra*, and another *bodhisattva* called “Vajra Navel” cannot destroy even a single atom of it, even though his superpowers are normally such that he can destroy absolutely everything, T397 13.82c18–83a16.

¹⁹⁶ T309 10.1022a18–19 1035a17.

¹⁹⁷ E.g. *Anavataptanāgarājaparipṛcchā-sūtra* T635 15.506a03–06. It is odd that the translation here, 金剛定, differs from that in other Dharmarakṣa texts. The same term is also in T288 10.584c20, but this text may not have actually been translated by Dharmarakṣa.

¹⁹⁸ E.g. *Buddhāvataṃsaka* T278 9.461c29; 金剛定意三昧 in the *Dharma-pada*/**Udānavarga*, T309 10.1022a18–19, 金剛定意 1035a17; MPNMS T375 12.753c06–13, 818a21–22; **Antarābhava-sūtra* T385 12.1067b17; *Tathāgatamahākaruṇā-nirdeśa* T397(2) 13.27c19–20, etc.

¹⁹⁹ T222 8.165b27–28, 191c07–09.

²⁰⁰ T231 8.710b28, T302 10.916c02–03.

to the very moment of final attainment. The “path of seeing” (*darśanamārga*) is followed by a so-called “irresistible path” (*ānantaryamārga*),²⁰¹ which is comprised by the *kṣāntis* (“endurances,” “patience”); this path is in turn followed by the final “path of liberation,” at which point the various kinds of special gnosis (*jñāna*) arise. The “irresistible path” is called “like adamant” (*vajropama-*) because it irresistibly destroys all the defilements and latent tendencies [towards rebirth] (*anuśaya*); further, it is also called precisely *vajropamasamādhi*.²⁰² Thus, *vajropamasamādhi* is the meditative state that immediately precedes and produces full buddhahood, and immediately following it, *kṣayajñāna* (the special gnostic awareness that all defilements have been destroyed) arises.²⁰³ Further, at the moment of *vajropamasamādhi*, immediately preceding *bodhi*, the *bodhisattva* fulfils the perfections of *dhyāna* and *prajñā*;²⁰⁴ it is associated with the state of mind in which the aspirant no longer has anything to practice or learn (*aśaikṣacitta*), which is free of all obstacles (*āvṛti*);²⁰⁵ and the text also says that a concentration that is for practical purposes called *vajropamasamādhi* is produced in the fourth *dhyāna*, and destroys all “outflows” (*āsrava*).²⁰⁶ The moment of the attainment of *bodhi* is further described by saying that the *bodhisattva* seats himself on the adamant seat (*vajrāsana*) in the middle of Jambudvīpa in order to realise the *vajropamasamādhi*, and so become Buddha and Arhat, and this is only possible for such a person in such a place.²⁰⁷ In sum, *vajropamasamādhi* is the most elevated meditative state possible, and is directly associated with

²⁰¹ Mainly expounded at Bh to 6.44d; translation following La Vallée Poussin 1980: 4:190, based upon Bh, *antarayitum aśakyatvāt*.

²⁰² La Vallée Poussin 1980: 4:190, 227–228. In typical scholastic detail, the text in fact expounds a number of different types of *vajropamasamādhi*, which are produced at different stages of the path, on the basis of various other meditative states; which are associated with different types of resulting gnosis, etc.; La Vallée Poussin 4:228–229.

²⁰³ Bh to 2.62, La Vallée Poussin 1980: 1:305.

²⁰⁴ Bh to 4.112b, La Vallée Poussin 1980: 3:231.

²⁰⁵ Bh to 6.77ab, La Vallée Poussin 1980: 4:299–300.

²⁰⁶ AK 8.28 and Bh, La Vallée Poussin 1980: 5:195.

²⁰⁷ Bh to 3.53cd, La Vallée Poussin 1980: 2:145–146.

the arising of full buddhahood and the full and final elimination of all *kleśas*, *āsravas*, obstacles to awakening, etc.

It is difficult to say how much earlier than AKBh this doctrine of *vajropamasamādhi* may have been expounded among the Sarvāstivādins, and therefore what might be the relative chronological relations between it and the doctrine of adamantine bodies. It is discussed at length in the **Mahāvibhāṣā*.²⁰⁸ However, so far as I can see, *vajropamasamādhi* cannot be traced back any earlier in the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma corpus (e.g. it is not found in the *Jñānaprasthāna* or any of the “six limbs” of the Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma). The best we can say, then, I believe, is that this doctrine may have emerged among the Sarvāstivāda in roughly the same period as the body doctrines studied in this paper,²⁰⁹ though the other evidence surveyed above suggests it may have circulated earlier, in part, at least, in Mahāyāna texts.

It is very interesting to observe that such a *samādhi* is variously said to be *like* adamant, or simply *of* adamant, though these assertions cannot, seemingly, be separated chronologically, as comparable body concepts can. I believe that in these observable parallels between notions about **vajra(-upama-)kāya* and **vajra(-upama-)samādhi*, and between *vajrakāya* and notions of adamant states of mind or *jñāna* more generally, we see a kind of dialectic interplay or contestation between ideas about special buddha-bodies and special buddha-mind. Be it adamant body, mind or gnosis, each such concept holds that the special property of buddhahood in question is intimately related to the Buddha’s realisation of *dharma* (in the case of body, through the association with *dharmakāya*); that it arises simultaneously with the attainment of buddhahood; that it is intimately linked to purity specifically articulated as the elimination of *āsravas* (or *kleśas*, *anuśayas* etc.). In its turn, I believe, this dialectical interaction between adamant bodies and minds is part of an even broader theme running throughout much

²⁰⁸ Esp. at T1546 28.111a01–112c09. Here, as elsewhere, Xuanzang’s translation is 金剛喻定.

²⁰⁹ For discussion of difficulties with the assumption that evidence similarly distributed necessarily predates the first translations of the **Mahāvibhāṣā* into Chinese by any large margin, see Radich 2009.

of the emergence of buddha-body doctrine, whereby that doctrine seems to have been conditioned by (and perhaps to have conditioned in its turn) discourses about the special nature of buddha-mind. Demonstration of this broader claim, however, is obviously beyond the scope of the present paper, and must await further work.

It is also worth lingering briefly to consider the possible centrality of the MPNMS in the elaboration of the doctrine of *vajrakāya*. We already saw above that *vajrakāya* appears many times throughout MPNMS, including in the layers identified by Shimoda as the earliest. We also saw that it is intimately and logically connected to other central themes of the text, including the actual eternity of the Buddha-cum-buddha-nature/*tathāgatarbha*, and the concomitant docetism about his earthly body and particularly its apparent demise (*parinirvāṇa*).

The theme of *vajrakāya* may also be connected to the theme of relics in MPNMS. It has been suggested that the notion of an innate kernel-of-buddhahood or “buddha-nature” (possibly **buddhadhātu*) may be connected to an attempt in MPNMS to substitute it for Buddha-relics (*dhātu*), as a way in which buddhahood is present to the practitioner/worshipper internally in opposition to the external presence of the relic in the *stūpa*.²¹⁰ Thus, the text sets up an ambiguity in the claim that the Buddha “enters into the domain/element of *nirvāṇa* (*nirvāṇadhātu*),” and then plays upon that ambiguity in its polemic to substitute for relic worship a different kind of cult and practice. On the other hand, as I noted above (p. 249), relics are said to be adamant and are connected to the theme of deathlessness (*amṛta*), perhaps from as early as the

²¹⁰ Shimoda summarises: “The *stūpa* ... was completely interiorized within the *bodhisattvas* in the form of *buddhadhātu* and *tathāgatarbha*,” Shimoda 1997: 39[L]; see also 278–298. See also, as an example of such a dialectic between relics and buddha-nature in other texts, Shimoda’s very interesting examination of parallel passages in the *Buddhacarita* and *Ratnagotravibhāga*, where the term *dhātu* is used in the former to refer to relics, but in the latter to refer to *tathāgatarbha*, *gotra* etc.; Shimoda 1997: 82–85; and his following analysis of the way the **Anuttarāśraya-sūtra* uses material originally referring to relics from the *Adbhutadharmaparyāya* to book-end *Ratnagotravibhāga* material about *tathāgatarbha*, 85–86. See also Shimoda 2008.

Senavarma Inscription. Thus, if Shimoda is right about the polemic against worship of relics in *stūpas* in MPNMS, the ascription of a *vajrakāya* to the Buddha may be an integral part of its polemical programme. It is as if the text says:

If you are so enamoured of “bodies” (*śarīrāṇi*, relics) or “elements” (*dhātu*) of the Buddha, which are adamant, deathless etc., let me tell you – the true “body” (*kāya*) in which the Buddha is adamant (*vajra*), eternal (*nitya*) etc. is his *dharmakāya*, which is identical with the element (*dhātu*) of potential buddhahood innate in all sentient beings, etc.

The lost Indic original of MPNMS may date, at least in part, as early as the second century,²¹¹ and this could obviously have important implications for dating the emergence of the idea of *vajrakāya*. Moreover, the extensive elaboration of the theme of *vajrakāya* in MPNMS, in combination with the manner in which it is integrated with central themes of the text, might suggest to us that the notion of *vajrakāya* originates in MPNMS itself. If this were true, and the text could be dated with any confidence, we would therefore know even more about the date at which *vajrakāya* was first elaborated. However, the stratification and dating of MPNMS is a complex and uncertain matter, and at this stage at least, any reasons I can suggest that it might have been the first text to expound *vajrakāya* are speculative at best. I thus prefer to rest my conclusions on the less informative but more reliable information about the dating of the idea that can be derived from the Chinese canonical evidence, in

²¹¹ This approximate dating is frequently given, based on the fact that the text has the Buddha predict that Māra will bring about the end of the *saddharma* seven hundred years after his *parinirvāṇa*; T375 12.643b25–26, Y 1:159. Hodge argues that core parts of the text are likely to have been written under the Śātavahana king Gautamīputra Śātakarṇi (r. 106–130 C.E.), and another stratum likely to have been written about 80 years later, around 220 C.E.; Hodge (2006, unpaginated). Hodge is currently working on a major study of the development of MPNMS, which will include parallel translations of Faxian, *Dharmakṣema and the Tibetan; this work leads him to believe that the core of the text may be even earlier than Śātakarṇi. He also believes the *Mahāmegha* “came from the same group as the MPNMS and is more or less contemporaneous within a few decades” (personal communications, September 2009).

line with the primary methodology I have pursued in this study.

Regardless of the date at which it was first elaborated, then, we can conclude that the idea of an immortal Buddha with a body of adamant was elaborated by the late fourth century at the latest. This fact, I believe, has a number of important implications. First, the notion of *vajrakāya* was eventually to become significant in Tantrism and related “inner alchemical” practices.²¹² The history related here may reveal part of the perhaps erratic path by which prototypes of such ideas emerged. Second, the emergence of *vajrakāya* is part of a much wider ferment of ideas about special buddha-bodies that characterises this same approximate period, which I have attempted to survey elsewhere. Studies of buddha-bodies to date have tended to focus too exclusively on the eventually dominant “three body” (*trikāya*) doctrine, which emerges in the same period, and to correspondingly overlook other ideas, such as *vajrakāya*. Even the import of *trikāya* doctrine itself can arguably only be fully understood, however, against the backdrop of this broader trend. Third, if I am right in suggesting that *vajrakāya* emerged in part from a polemical dialectic with the terms of relic worship, this may only be one part of a broader sense in which relics were regarded as buddha-bodies among other buddha-bodies, and the very idea of buddha-bodies may have been significantly conditioned by understandings and practices relating to relics. Relics may thus constitute an important “missing link” in the history of buddha-bodies, and the connection to relics at the root of the idea of *vajrakāya* may be one of the most important pieces of evidence for their status as such. Full exploration of these implications, however, must await further research.

²¹² See for example White 1996: 70, 102, 202, 271; Davidson 2002: 283. Cf. also the “five bodies” schema, where *vajrakāya* and *abhisambodhikāya* are added to the *trikāya* schema.

Abbreviations

AK(Bh)	<i>Abhidharmakośa</i> (and <i>Bhāṣya</i>)
AN	<i>Anguttara Nikāya</i>
Ch.	Chinese
D	Derge
DN	<i>Dīgha Nikāya</i>
EA	* <i>Ekottarikāgama</i> T125
IBK	<i>Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū</i> 印度学仏教学研究
LAn	<i>Lokānuvartanā-sūtra</i> T807
LAS	<i>Lañkāvatāra-sūtra</i>
<i>Lishi</i>	<i>Lishi yi shan jing</i> T135
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>
MPNMS	<i>Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra</i>
MPPU	* <i>Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa</i> T1509
<i>Pañca</i>	<i>Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā</i>
PTS	Pāli Text Society. Reference to PTS editions of canonical texts by volume and page number.
Skt.	Sanskrit
SN	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>
T	<i>Taishō shinshū daizōkyō</i> . References to the Taishō follow the order: Text number, volume number, page, register and line number. Thus e.g. T225 8.483b17 is text number 225, volume 8, page 483, second register, line 17.
Tib.	Tibetan
XZ	Xuanzang 玄奘
Y	Yamamoto trans. of MPNMS

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