

# Is “Illusion” a *Prajñāpāramitā* Creation?

## The Birth and Death of a Buddhist Cognitive Metaphor

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COGNITIVE METAPHORICAL SHOCK AND AWE: “EVEN *NIRVĀṆA* IS LIKE  
AN ILLUSION, LIKE A DREAM?”

The *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, often translated into English as the “Perfection of Wisdom,” have often been raised as representatives of the literature of the Mahāyāna movement as a whole within modern Buddhist studies. While not the first Western scholar to study the *Prajñāpāramitā*, Edward Conze spent many decades in the second half of the twentieth century devoted to translation and research on the genre, rightly earning himself the reputation of being the foremost Western spokesperson for this body of literature. His translations from Sanskrit, with reference to the Tibetan, include the core texts of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, its verse summary the *Ratnaguṇasamcaya Gāthā* (hereafter “*Rgs*”), an eclectic version of the *Aṣṭādaśasāhasrikā* cum *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* based on a hodgepodge of various texts combined together, the *Vajracchedikā* “Diamond” and *Hṛdaya* “Heart,” as well as a number of lesser known smaller texts.<sup>1</sup>

In an article on “Mahāyāna Buddhism,” Conze gave much weight to the *Prajñāpāramitā* material in introducing the Mahāyāna as a whole.<sup>2</sup> In explaining the notion of “Skill in Means” (*upāya*), and “the goal of

the Beyond,” after paraphrasing the “metaphor of the raft” from the *Vajracchedikā*, Conze cites a passage from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, as follows:

In the *Perfection of Wisdom* the anxious gods ask the Venerable Subhūti: “Even Nirvāṇa, Holy Subhūti, you say is like an illusion, is like a dream?” and they receive this reply: “Even if perchance there could be anything more distinguished, of that also I would say that it is like an illusion, like a dream. For not two different things are illusions and Nirvāṇa, are dreams and Nirvāṇa.” (*Buddhist Texts*, no. 165). Nirvāṇa, as the true Reality, is one single, and it has no second. All multiplicity, all separation, all duality is a sign of falseness. Everything apart from the One, also called “Emptiness” or “Suchness,” is devoid of real existence, and whatever may be said about it is ultimately untrue, false and nugatory, though perhaps permissible if the salvation of beings requires it.<sup>3</sup>

Most readers will find the stress on “emptiness” as a core teaching of the *Prajñāpāramitā* all too familiar, for we have constantly been told by the modern academic discourse on emptiness that this particular Mahāyāna doctrine hails from the *Prajñāpāramitā*, only to find full expression in the *Madhyamaka* of Nāgārjuna and others such as Candrakīrti.<sup>4</sup> Here, we draw the reader’s attention to the equivalence drawn between the ultimate goal, that is, *nirvāṇa*, and “illusions” (*māyā*) and “dreams” (*svapna*). This exact passage would later be picked up on by a number of other scholars as they, too, introduced what they considered to be core elements of the Mahāyāna tradition.

Before we discuss these theories, an important text-historical issue must also be raised at this point. Modern Western Buddhist studies specialists, particularly the Europeans up to the mid to late twentieth century, took text-historical methods such as philology as the basic groundwork for any study. Conze was no exception, though he did warn that “when carried too far they threaten to shatter and pulverize the very text which they set out to examine.”<sup>5</sup> This can be seen in his nine phase system of the historical development of the core *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, in “The Development of *Prajñāpāramitā* Thought,” where the two phases are: (1) the initial formulation represented by the first two chapters (of the *Ratnaguṇasamcaya Gāthā* verse summary); and (2) chapters 3–28 of the verse summary and equivalent material in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* text.<sup>6</sup> The basic content of the first two chapters, the “initial formulation,” constitute Conze’s “ur-sūtra.”<sup>7</sup> A number of other scholars from similar philological backgrounds, such as Hikata, Vaidya, Kajiyoshi, Schmithausen, and Yinshun, have also propounded various “ur-sūtra” theories.<sup>8</sup> The key point here is that the above cited

passages from the *sūtra* are drawn from chapter 2, giving some weight to the notion that “*nirvāṇa* = illusion and dream” is a crucial part at the heart of the original *Prajñāpāramitā*, and thus the formation of the Mahāyāna as a whole.

Conze explains “three aspects of the attitude which the wise man should adopt to all the phenomena he may encounter,” referencing the Rgs. The third of these entails: “All phenomena should be treated as *illusory*, as *māyā*,” for which the *Prajñāpāramitā* extends this to even include *nirvāṇa* itself, “the fruits of the holy life, whether won by Arhats, Pratyekabuddhas or fully enlightened Buddhas, and that Nirvāṇa itself ‘are mere illusions, mere dreams.’” Note that Conze describes such statements, which include *nirvāṇa* as illusory as a “novelty,” “so startling” that it needs an apocryphal appeal to the Buddha’s authority, a “shocking departure from accepted ideas.”<sup>9</sup> Apart from within the alleged “ur-text,” a similar “short essay” in chapter 26 of the text also talks about “the illusory nature of all things.”<sup>10</sup>

Since Conze so succinctly set this narrative rolling, a number of other scholars have also followed suit in presenting the illusory nature of all phenomena in this very passage as a core part of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, in turn a representative of the Mahāyāna as a whole. For example, Yinshun, in his late Chinese work *An Investigation into Emptiness* (*Kong zhi tanjiu* 空之探究), cites this exact same passage from the smaller and also medium *Prajñāpāramitā* text, directly equating it with emptiness.<sup>11</sup> The book as a whole dedicates full subchapters to both “The Emptiness of *Dharmas* as Illusory” and also “Illusion—Dependent Origination which is Emptiness and Designation,” effectively giving a Madhyamaka interpretation to these passages in the *sūtras*.<sup>12</sup> In English, Paul Williams states in his *Mahāyāna Buddhism*:

The principal ontological message of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is an extension of the Buddhist teaching of no-Self to equal no essence, and therefore no inherent existence, as applied to all things without exception. This is not some form of Monistic Absolutism, negating in order to uncover a True Ultimate Reality. The ultimate truth is that there is no such thing.<sup>13</sup>

He then directly cites Conze’s translation of the aforementioned *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* passage, showing the importance he credits to it.<sup>14</sup> Williams then draws a line from the *Sutta Nipāta*, often considered perhaps the earliest of all Buddhist teachings, through to the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and then jumps into Candrakīrti’s Madhyamaka.<sup>15</sup> Later, following what may be called the standard academic narrative of emptiness, it is given to Nāgārjuna to further the notion of illusion and dream entities with: “In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Perfection of Wisdom*, *nirvāṇa* is declared to be ‘like an

illusion, like a dream'. It is in the Madhyamaka that we find arguments to demonstrate such dramatic assertions."<sup>16</sup> We also see this position in Streng's entry for "*Śūnyam* and *Śūnyatā*" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*.<sup>17</sup> Other scholars also cite the same passages from the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* on *nirvāṇa* and illusion as significant, even when their topic of discussion is not necessarily *nirvāṇa*, illusion, or dream itself, for example, MacQueen's "Inspired Speech in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism,"<sup>18</sup> and also Schuster in her "Changing the Female Body: Wise Women and the Bodhisattva Career in Some *Mahāratnakūṭasūtras*."<sup>19</sup> However, despite the importance that this *sūtra* passage is given in this narrative of emptiness in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, unfortunately, none of these studies probes the issue of the originality of "illusion" within the early Mahāyāna texts. Yet, without such a study of the sources, how can we be assured that this is really a "novel" and "shocking" *Prajñāpāramitā* creation?

The use of such passages from the supposed ur-text of a *sūtra* considered to be one of the earliest Mahāyāna texts belies modern text-historical scholarship's fascination with "origins." Paul Harrison has well summarized the motivation behind this approach in the Mahāyāna as "the idea that if we can understand the beginnings of something, we are better placed to understand the whole thing, as if its essential character were somehow fixed and readable in the genetic encoding of its conception."<sup>20</sup> The importance of historicity in identifying causal development is well expressed by Richard Gombrich when he states that "if you don't know which came first, A or B, then you can't tell whether A could have been the cause of B. And I am interested in causal questions."<sup>21</sup> Thus, to position ourselves to deduce historical relationships, it is necessary to examine the earlier traditions that precede our subject of inquiry. Yet this has already been clearly stated some time ago by Conze, when he himself stated that:

The *Prajñāpāramitā* texts are so elusive to our understanding, because they are full of hidden hints, allusions, and indirect references to the pre-existing body of scriptures and traditions circulating in the memory of the Buddhist community at the time. They are more often than not an echo of older sayings. Without the relation to the older sayings they lose most of their point. We at present have to reconstruct laboriously what seemed a matter of course 1,500 years ago.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, it is at least as important to look into material that *precedes* the *Prajñāpāramitā* in order to understand it, as it is to look to *later* commentaries, such as with Williams and Conze. When these early Mahāyāna texts were first compiled in and around the turn of the millennium, it would have been the earlier material that was in the minds of the anonymous

authors of the time, not the systems developed in later centuries. In fact, the overreliance on later commentarial works such as passages in the later *sūtras* that gloss the earlier texts, classic Madhyamaka, or even the much later *Abhisamayālaṃkāra* commentary, may quickly lead to problems of anachronistic interpretations. This is a problem commonly seen in the modern academic narrative of emptiness.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, one of Conze's shortcomings was, as a self-professed specialist in Indian Buddhism, apart from reliance on other scholars' works, such as the translations from the Chinese of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Upadeśa* by Étienne Lamotte, aside, he was unable to access much valuable textual material from early and mainstream Buddhism now preserved only in Chinese.

The intention behind this essay is thus to examine the "pre-existing body of scriptures and traditions" before these passages in the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*, to reconstruct the possible relationship between these pre- and proto-Mahāyāna texts, in order to verify, disprove, or amend the claim that "all phenomena are illusory, like a dream" was a shocking novelty, a radical departure from accepted norms within the Buddhist tradition of the time.

#### KITTAY'S PERSPECTIVAL APPROACH AND SEMANTIC FIELDS

But historical development of the idea aside, how will we go about the examination of the metaphor itself? In order to analyze this textual material, we shall draw from several modern studies of metaphor in the linguistic philosophical sense. In particular, Eva Kittay's "perspectival approach" from her *Metaphor, Its Cognitive Force and Linguistic Structure*,<sup>24</sup> developed from earlier important studies and theories by linguistic philosophers such as Richards and later Black.<sup>25</sup> Kittay describes this approach as follows:

To call our theory perspectival is to name it for the function metaphor serves: to provide a perspective from which to gain an understanding of that which is metaphorically portrayed. This is a distinctively cognitive role. Since *perspectival* implies a subject who observes from a stance, we can say that metaphor provides the linguistic realization for the cognitive activity by which a language speaker makes use of one linguistically articulated domain, and similarly, by which a hearer grasps such an understanding.<sup>26</sup>

Kittay calls the content domain that is to be understood the "topic," and the metaphor which is applied to transfer meaning the "vehicle." This differs from Black's "tenor" and "vehicle" respectively.<sup>27</sup> As Kittay's approach is broad—a general theory of metaphor as it were—we shall only draw

upon certain elements here. The combination of both the “cognitive” and “linguistic” aspects is obviously pertinent for our specific metaphor of the “illusory” here, and several scholars of religion have used Kittay’s approach to examine ancient religious texts, such as Long and Moore.<sup>28</sup>

The notion of “semantic fields” is a core part of this approach, explained first in theory and then also in application.<sup>29</sup> This itself was developed from de Saussure’s system of signs, the signifier and signified.<sup>30</sup> It has the advantage of avoiding the problems of examining metaphors in terms of mere words or phrases, or even on the level of sentence semantics, as the entire structure of the field is what facilitates the shift in meaning which characterizes metaphorical function.<sup>31</sup> That semantic fields are shared across a community of language users is also salient here,<sup>32</sup> reminding us that we must look to a broader usage of our “illusion” metaphor across the ancient Indian religio-philosophical community beyond Buddhism alone. More specifically, at the language before and during the period of composition of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*, rather than that of the commentarial phase centuries after the fact.

Kittay’s general notion of semantic fields includes both “lexical fields” and “content domains”;<sup>33</sup> “A lexical field consists of a set of *labels*,” where “[s]imple labels are generally ‘word-forms’ of single words,” but include idiomatic expressions and phrases. “A content domain denotes a domain from which we determine the interpretation of an element of the lexical field.” The lexical field maps onto the content domain—as de Saussure’s signifier and signified—though the lexical field does not necessarily exhaust the content domain. Semantic fields consist of a set of “contrast sets,” where the elements of the contrast set are hyponyms for the “covering term,” that is, specific examples of the covering term.<sup>34</sup> For example:

< < *Animal* >: dog, cat, bird, fish >

“Animal” covers the various hyponyms of “dog,” “cat,” “bird,” “fish,” and so forth; and there are other animals not included within the list of four contrasted sets. The contrast sets may themselves be ordered, having a specific relationship, such as complementarity, degree, temporal progression, or others. For example, days of the week:

< < *Days of the week* >: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday >

In this case, the covering word, and thus content domain, are exhausted fully, without any content material not included, unlike the example of < < *Animal* >: dog, cat, bird, fish > above, although ordered contrast sets

are not at all required to be exhaustive, and there thus may be many gaps, asymmetries, and indeterminacies within the lexical field.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the very fact that the lexical field may not exhaust the domain may be one of the very reasons why a distinctly different lexical field originally associated with its own domain may need to be borrowed to cover originally unmapped terms—thus, the creation or birth of a metaphor. This is not the only reason for the creation of metaphor, however.

At this point, there may be some confusion in understanding of the metaphor: Is the newly born metaphor a “live birth,” that is to say, can it be accepted into the linguistic community? If so, it may be christened and find its role within the community of that language, in the process causing shifts in other lexical fields, and transforming semantic fields to change cognitive perspectives on content domains. But, if it is a “stillbirth,” so to speak, there being no transference of meaning across lexical fields and content domains, then it will be declared catachresis, a mere “abuse of language.”<sup>36</sup> This is a matter of consensus or not, a notion Buddhists are well aware of in the formulation of “conventional truths” (P: *sammūṭṭisacca*; Skt: *saṃvṛtisatya*). If it survives infancy, grows and matures, it may come to its metaphorical demise, and become a “dead metaphor.” This is not the loss of the word, phrase, or expression itself, but loss of its metaphorical character. That is, through long and habitual usage, the metaphor vehicle “begins to act like a literal meaning.”<sup>37</sup> As such, for Ricœur at least, “dead metaphors are no longer metaphors.”<sup>38</sup> So many of the examples in Lakoff and Johnson’s acclaimed *Metaphors We Live By* are just such “dead metaphors.”<sup>39</sup> Their original metaphorical sense and cognitive underpinnings long since forgotten, they now stand in equal place as signifier referents to the original topic terms in expressing their signified semantic domains. A host of Buddhist ideas also fall into this category, the original prosaic sense already long forgotten as a specifically technical doctrinal meaning rose to become the predominant sense of the term.

Due to its breadth, much must remain unsaid here on the theory and approach to metaphor by Kittay and others. We hope the forthcoming applied investigation will further clarify the theory through example. Thus, we shall continue below by first examining sources from the broader ancient Indian religio-philosophical linguistic community, to discover from whence the metaphor of “illusion” was born, or perhaps adopted.

#### BIRTH (AND ADOPTION) OF “ILLUSION”: PRE- AND EARLY BUDDHISM

We will first examine the canonical texts of the pre-Buddhist period and early Buddhism to understand their notion of “illusion.” By

“pre-Buddhist” we refer to the ancient Vedic and early Upaniṣadic traditions. As Nakamura observes, the Vedic sources “were advocated by one group of Brāhmins at that time, and probably became known to the Buddhists and Jains.”<sup>40</sup> By “early Buddhism” we do not mean to imply “original,” the philological holy grail of establishing the “original words of the historical Buddha” now being somewhat out of vogue. We do believe that cross-comparison of parallel texts from a number of early Buddhist schools will reveal in their commonalities those basic teachings that existed before the division into such schools occurred. Taking the first basic schism of the Buddhist community into the Sthaviras and Mahāsāṃghika to have occurred during the time of Aśoka (c. 268–232 BCE) with later splits continuing subsequently, we can give an approximate date for “early Buddhism” from the time of the Buddha himself up to the third or perhaps even the second century BCE. This is almost universally regarded as well before the start of the Mahāyāna, including the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and many centuries before the time of Nāgārjuna himself. The extant texts of the earliest *sūtra* discourses are the five *Nikāyas* of the Pāli canon, and also the Chinese translations of the four *Āgamas*, where parallel or equivalent texts are held in at least two mainstream traditions.

### Pre-Buddhist Illusion (Māyā)

The first usage appears in the ancient *Ṛg Veda* itself. Verse 6:47:18 describes the god Indra’s figure and form as it appears to human being. It states that “Indra moves multiform by his illusions (*māyābhiḥ*).”<sup>41</sup> Later in the text, in Book 10, two further verses use the term. Verse 10:54:2 states again of Indra that “[a]ll that men called thy battles was illusion (*māyet*): no foe hast thou to-day, nor erst hast found one.”<sup>42</sup> In the same book, verse 10:71:5 describes a man of poor character who has not heard the sacred Voice (*Vāk*) as “[h]e wanders on in profitless illusion (*māyaya*): the Voice he heard yields neither fruit, nor blossom.”<sup>43</sup>

In the *Upaniṣads*, we see the term *māyā* in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*. Olivelle describes this text as “a somewhat late text composed under the influence of both the Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition and the emerging theistic tendencies,” in which “the numerous citations from older Vedic texts indicate that the author is attempting to support his doctrines with Vedic proof texts, often presented with new interpretations.”<sup>44</sup> Olivelle’s translation of verses 4:9–10 reads as follows:

9. Metres, sacrifices, rites, religious observances, the past, the future, and what the Vedas proclaim—from that the illusionist (*māyī*) creates this



whole world, and in it the other remains confined by the illusory power (*māyayā*).

10. One should recognize the illusory power (*māyām*) as primal matter (*prakṛtiṃ*), and the illusionist (*māyīnam*), as the great Lord (*maheśvara*). This whole living world is thus pervaded by things that are parts of him.<sup>45</sup>

In his notes, the translator further comments and explains the term as “an early use of this term as a cosmic category,” but “more a ‘trick’ or ‘magic’ than cosmic illusion” of the later philosophical schools. “This magic is used by the ‘illusionist’ (i.e. the Lord Indra as magician) to create the world in which ‘the other’ (i.e. individual souls) are trapped.”<sup>46</sup>

Hajime Nakamura comments on these very same verses of the *Śvetāśvatara* in relation to “Early Jainism” in his classic *A History of Early Vedānta Philosophy*. He states that “the natural world was likened to the miraculous power of a god or an illusion (*māyā*); and the God Rudra, the creator of the world, was called a magician or deceiver (*māyin*).”<sup>47</sup>

### Cognition Is Like an Illusion (*Phenapiṇḍūpama*)

Enter the Buddha: The first early Buddhist text that demands immediate examination is the *Phenapiṇḍūpama Sutta*, located in the Pāli canon within the series of texts on the five aggregates, at SN 22:95, and with a parallel in Chinese translation at SĀ 265. In this *sutta*, the meditator contemplates the five aggregates as follows: form as “a lump of foam” (*phenapiṇḍa*) (from which the text derives its name); sensation as “a water bubble” (*bubbūla*); perception as “a mirage” (*marici*); formations as “a plantain tree” (*kadalik-khandha*); and cognition as “a magical illusion” (*māyā*) respectively. The five passages for each of the aggregates are otherwise identical, and we may thus just here cite in full that for the aggregate of cognition which utilizes the “magical illusion” metaphor:

Suppose, monks, that a magician (*māyākāro*) or a magician’s apprentice (*māyākārantevāsī*) would display a magical illusion (*māyaṃ*) at a crossroads. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void (*rittaka*), hollow (*tucchaka*), coreless (*asāraka*). For what core (*sāro*) could there be in a magical illusion (*māyāya*)? So too, monks, whatever kind of cognition there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a monk inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void (*rittaka*), hollow (*tucchaka*), coreless (*asāraka*). For what core (*sāro*) could there be in cognition?<sup>48</sup>



Such contemplations lead the ardent meditating monk to develop revulsion toward the five aggregates, thus becoming freed from the passions, and finally liberated. The above—all in prose—is then rather unsystematically represented in verse, which includes the following stanza:

Such is this continuum (*santāno*),  
This illusion (*māyāyam*), beguiler of fools. It is taught to be a murderer;  
Here no core (*sāro*) can be found.<sup>49</sup>

The SĀ version of this text, *sūtra* 265, \**Phenapiṇḍa* (Jūmo 聚沫), differs only slightly. Firstly, it provides specific examples of the illusions that are created, giving the traditional four types of military forces, namely, elephants (*xiangbing* 象兵), cavalry (*mabing* 馬兵), chariots (*chebing* 車兵), and infantry (*bubing* 步兵). Though it uses the same five metaphors as SN 22:95, it uses not three but four adjectives to describe each of the aggregates, adding “nothingness” (*wusuoyou* 無所有; \**akimcanya*) before solid (*wulao* 無牢; *riktaka*), unreal (*wushi* 無實; *tucchaka*) and insubstantial (*wuyou jiangū* 無有堅固; *asāraka*). Also, in the final verse of the text, the SĀ adds “without self, or what pertains to self,” as a basic synonym to these terms.<sup>50</sup> Other than this, the SĀ content matches that of SN.

#### Void (*Ritta*), Hollow (*Tuccha*), and Coreless (*Asāra*)

The *Phenapiṇḍūpama Sutta* features a set of three (or four) terms used for the contemplations—void (*ritta[ka]*), hollow (*tuccha[ka]*) and coreless (*asāra[ka]*)—which are worthy of further consideration. The three terms most commonly appear together in pericopes found in a number of texts. For example, in the *Sutta Nipāta*, “hollow” (*tuccha*) is used to describe the falseness of theories in a dispute, “What some say is true, real, others say is empty (*tuccham*), false.”<sup>51</sup> The two terms *void* (*rittaka*) and *hollow* (*tucchaka*) are often used together to imply the sense of something as “worthlessness,” “vacuous,” and “vain.” For example, in DN 13, *Tevijja Sutta*, we find baseless claims by the Brahmins criticized as being “mere words, empty (*rittaka*) and vain (*tucchaka*).”<sup>52</sup> Also, in MN 49, *Brahmanimantanika Sutta*, concluding a discussion about the extent of the Buddha’s experiential knowledge of the world, a Brahma chides the Buddha about his transmundane knowledge, saying: “Good sir, if that is not partaken of by the allness of all, may it not turn out to be vacuous (*rittaka*) and empty (*tucchaka*) for you!”<sup>53</sup> In other words, such a thing may actually exist, rather than being a mere phrase or idea not based on real fact.

This sense of being worthless and vacuous in these three terms is also found in other uses of the term *māyā*. Some modern scholars and translators



have rendered this consistently with the metaphors in the *Phenapiṇḍa Sutta* as “illusion,” such as Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi in their translation of MN 106, *Āneñjasappāya*: “Monks, sensual pleasures are impermanent, hollow, false, deceptive; they are illusory (*māyākatame*), the prattle of fools.”<sup>54</sup> Norman renders the exact same term elsewhere in a passage from the *Suttanipāta* 2:9: “Having abandoned laughter, mumbling, lamentation, hatred, deception (*māyākatam*), hypocrisy, greed and pride, impetuosity, roughness, sin and infatuation, he should wander without pride, with steadfast self.”<sup>55</sup> Basically in this sense, *māyā* is a direct synonym for the three terms *ritta(ka)*, *tuccha(ka)*, and *asāra(ka)* as found in the *Phenapiṇḍupama Sutta*, above.

### Semantic Field Analysis for the Pre- and Early Period

Having covered the various textual sources for pre- and early Buddhist uses of the term *illusion*, we may now proceed with an analysis through Kittay’s perspectival approach of semantic fields. In the first two of our earliest *R̥g Veda* passages (§0), we may construct the following semantic field:

< < Divine illusions >: Indra’s multiform movements, Indra’s battles >

Though the third passage provides less material, merely using the term *māya* to refer to the lack of profit or fruition, we shall, however, be able to supplement this from later material. The two verses from the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* do provide greater depth for analysis, but providing several syntagmatic structures for how the illusory creation takes place. Verses 4:9 can be parsed as follows:

[Agent] Illusionist (*māyī*)  
[verb<sub>1</sub>] creates (*sṛjate*) [subject] the whole world (*viśva*) [instrument<sub>1</sub>] by way of metres, sacrifices...what the Vedas proclaim;  
[subject] (the whole world) [verb<sub>2</sub>] is confined (*saṁniruddhaḥ*) [instrument<sub>2</sub>] by illusory power (*māyayā*).<sup>56</sup>

The explication in verse 4:10 allows us to make the following two parallel structures:

[Agent] The great Lord (*maheśvara*) [verb<sub>1</sub>] creates (√*bhū*?) [subject] the whole living world (*sarvam jagat*) [instrument<sub>1</sub>] by way of His primal matter (*prakṛtiṁ*); [subject] (the whole world) [verb<sub>2</sub>] is pervaded (*vyāptaṁ*) [instrument<sub>2</sub>] (by His primal matter).

While verse 4:10 substitutes several terms, other terms such as *the world* remain, effectively bridging these two semantic fields. To the modern reader, it may indeed be difficult to distinguish which of the two verses so parsed is the “topic” and which the “vehicle”—neither of the two images commonly feature in our present English-speaking linguistic community. However, by the phrasing of verse 4:10, it would appear that the notion of the illusionist who creates through Vedic recitation in accord with earlier Vedic Brahmanism is the vehicle, creating a structure by which to conceptualize the emergent role of Maheśvara (or Rudra), who is the main topic of this particular *Upaniṣad*.

This also strongly suggests that—for the Brahmins at least—the very notion of “illusion” (*māya*) itself was not at all new. Subsequent Buddhist usage may have appropriated and adapted this, but it certainly did not invent the concept or coin the phrase. We can see this elsewhere, too, and the work of Richard Gombrich in particular clearly demonstrates the Buddha’s appropriation of Brahmanic notions of aggregates (*skandha*), fire (*agni*), and extinguishing (*nirvāṇa*) and so forth, terms originally constituting parts of the semantic field concerning ritual sacrifice (*karma*).<sup>57</sup>

We may now move into the material found in the *Phenapiṇḍūpama Sutta*, which is also metaphorically very rich (§0). It is important to note that the aggregate of cognition—here as “this continuum”—is never directly referred to as being “an illusion.” While the name of the text utilizes the term *upama*, meaning simile or metaphor, the text does not use this term for any of the aggregates. It instead describes the foam, etc., or magical illusion, in several sentences, and then shifts to the aggregates through the phrase “So, too, whatever kind of [form, sensation, etc.]” (*Evam eva yam kiñci...*). Our analysis may begin with the semantic field that is perhaps the *locus classicus* of the Buddhist analysis of the subjective or experiential world—the five aggregates—our metaphorical topic to be elucidated:

< < *Five aggregates* >: material form, sensation, perception, volitions, cognition >

Note that this field is exhaustive of the designated “person” or “individual,” there being nothing of the person outside these five. Each is discussed in turn, which thus generates the five parallel metaphorical vehicles. This list of hyponyms has no explicit covering name, but we may use the three terms mentioned in the text itself, namely, void, hollow, or coreless things (§0).

< < *Void [/ hollow / coreless] things* >: foam, bubble, mirage, plantain, illusion >

While the list of the aggregates is meant to be exhaustive of the subjective world, the list of void (etc.) things is obviously not. Moreover, while the relationship between the five hyponymic aggregates is well known through other texts, the relationships between the five void (etc.) things is not clear. This does mean that the relational characteristics between the two semantic fields is not an ideal map.

The use of the terms *void*, *hollow*, and *coreless* in this vehicle field then focuses around the term *core* (or “substance”) (*sāra*), which is then transferred to the topic field, as the aggregate in question is also said to be without a “core” (or “substance”). This term thus functions as the connector between the topic and vehicle. From our knowledge of the Buddhist linguistic community of the time, this phrase would have been very readily understood as being a metaphor for the standard notion of the aggregates being “without a self” (*anattā*), or, slightly less common at the time, of their being “empty” (*suñña*). The standard semantic field simply being as follows:

< < *Selfless / empty things* >: material form, sensation, perception, volitions, cognition >

Elsewhere, known to the Buddhist linguistic community but not specifically mentioned in this text, we have coextensive lexical fields referring to the same identical content domain. These include the twelve sense spheres (*āyatana*) or the eighteen elements (*dhātu*).

< < *12 sense spheres* >: eye...mind, visual forms...mental objects >

Likewise for the eighteen elements. In addition, a superset of these could be generated in turn:

< < < *Taxonomies of all things* >: 5 aggregates, 12 sense spheres, 18 elements, etc. > >

Or, in terms of their being selfless or empty, the following superset in terms of Buddhist taxonomies:

< < *Sets of empty / selfless things* >: 5 aggregates, 12 sense spheres, 18 elements >

Each of these sets is coextensive, and thus mutually replaceable. An implication would be that while our text here uses five metaphors as vehicles to indicate the selfless nature of the five aggregates as topic, it would be also conceivable to have a set of twelve or eighteen vehicles of

void, hollow, and coreless—thus selfless and empty—things, mapped onto these other taxonomies of all things.

We still, however, have other uses of the term *māya*, which have been rendered into English as “deception” or the like, rather than as “illusion” (§o). This appears in the third of the *Rg Veda* passages and also Buddhist material such as the *Sutta Nipāta*. In particular, it refers to speech, or words, that has nothing real, true, or substantial behind it. Or, in an ethical sense, that there is pretense of goodness where in reality it does not exist. The usage in modern English is the idea that words can be “hollow.” While this is indeed still strictly a metaphor—based on a sense of spatial hollowness—it is a dead metaphor, so ingrained in our thinking that we no longer see it as such.<sup>58</sup> In several of the examples, a list of terms is given, and we can outline the various nonexhaustive hyponyms of the semantic field of such “deceptions” of human behavior as follows:

< < *Deceptions* >: prattle, empty words, vanities, illusions, conceit, hypocrisy... >

As we shall see in our next two sections, this sense of *māya* as a deception of human behavior did not become the default sense of the metaphor in subsequent historical stages of Buddhist thought. Though the broader notions of *māya* as referring to the selfless or empty nature of all things—in some taxonomy or other—began to take on an increasingly significant role.

#### ADOLESCENCE OF “ILLUSION”: MAINSTREAM BUDDHISM

Having examined the early texts above, we may now move on to the subsequent mainstream sectarian period. It is important to keep in mind that this historical distinction is a simple heuristic rather than a hard historical fact. The previous section spanned up to the third, or at the latest, the second century BCE. Our material here, rather, begins from the end of this period, when the *Nikāyas* and *Āgamas* were still being compiled by each of the schools.

We shall cite several *sūtras*, texts that appear in the *Āgamas* of some schools, but are not necessarily evidenced in other schools. They thus lie outside our basic criteria for textual sources of “early Buddhism.” In particular, this includes several *sūtras* for which we have Chinese translations in the Sarvāstivādin *Sā* and the later Mahāyāna-influenced Mahāsāṃghika *Eā*, in addition to the *Śālistamba Sūtra* and *Mahāvastu*. Of the *Sā* texts, one was considered one of the “*Mahāsūtras*,” which were considered important enough to have their own canonical subcategory, the significance of which we shall discuss below. Thus, as radical as Bodhi suggests the *Pheṇapiṇḍa*

*Sutta* is for the *Theravādins*, this notion seems rather more common in the northern *Āgama* literature. There are several examples, such as the *\*Māyājāla*, the *\*Hastatāḍopama*, and other *sūtras*. Several of these, both the texts themselves and their appearances in commentarial literature, have been discussed by Yinshun.<sup>59</sup> In addition to these mainstream *sūtras*, we also have a range of sectarian literature. This includes the two Abhidharma/Abhidhamma traditions, as well as commentarial *sāstras*. Again, we shall draw from both Sthavīra and Mahāsāṃghika sources.

### Developments and Commentaries on Foam (*Phenapiṇḍa*)

Earlier, we discussed the notion that the aggregate of cognition is like an illusion in the early *Phenapiṇḍupama Sutta* (SN 22:95 and SĀ 265). We shall here examine some later mainstream *sūtras*, which may have developed from this and related texts, and also commentaries on these.

A first partial parallel of this material is found in the later EĀ 35:9, *\*Phenapiṇḍa* (Jù mò 聚沫). With similar prose and verse to SN 22:95 and SĀ 265, it adds: “Fully contemplate all conditionings as empty pacification (kōngjī 空寂; *\*śūnyaśānti*).” The text’s final comments suggest that the Buddha’s own full awakening was accomplished through just such a contemplation.<sup>60</sup>

Elsewhere in EĀ we see the use of “illusion” and other metaphors. For example, EĀ 26:7 gives several metaphors to describe the impermanence of the human body as like “a ball of snow” (*\*himapiṇḍa*), “a heap of dirt” (*\*mṛttikarasi*), “a mirage” (*\*mṛgaṭṛṣṇa*; literally “deer thirst”), “an illusion” (*māyā*), or “an empty fist used to fool a child” (*\*riktamuṣṭi* / *\*hastā*).<sup>61</sup>

The second partial parallel is SĀ 186, which has no full Pāli equivalent. It features four of the five metaphors, namely “foam,” “bubble,” “plantain tree,” and “illusion.”<sup>62</sup> The “mirage” metaphor for the aggregate of perception does not appear in our extant version of this *sūtra*. However, given that the entirety of the text is simply lists of contemplations (guān 觀) which are elsewhere found in other *sūtras*, it would appear that this is simply a scribal or translation omission, rather than having a specific significance. Such texts, unfortunately, provide little material to further a clearer picture of how the illusion metaphor was understood.

In addition to such direct parallels, common strings of similar metaphors found in many texts seem to be paraphrases from the *Phenapiṇḍa Sūtra*, albeit with minor embellishments. These appear to have been more prominent in literature with a more popular appeal. For instance, the *Sarvāstivādin* biographical work on the Buddha, the *Lalitavistara*, repeatedly states that sensual desires are (metaphorically) like an illusion, a mirage, comparing them to lumps of foam, hollow, vain and not self. For example, in *Lalitavistara* verse 13:98:

98. Complexes have no inner might, are empty in themselves;  
 Rather like the stem of the plantain tree, when one reflects on them,  
 Like an illusion (*māyopama*) which deludes the mind (*citta*),  
 Like an empty fist with which a child is teased.<sup>63</sup>

Similarly in verse 13:107:

107. He discerns the cessation and becoming of an act of cognition  
 (*viññāna*), The cessation and origin of consciousness (*viññāna*). The Yogin  
 sees that it has come from nowhere, gone to nowhere, That it is empty,  
 and like unto an illusion (*māyopama*).<sup>64</sup>

In both these verses, the term is identical to that in the *Phenapiṇḍa*, namely, *māyopama*. The underlying themes of this whole thread of verses, however, are really dependent origination and emptiness, and the relationship between the two. “Illusion” is just one of many metaphors and rhetorical devices to explain this profound teaching.

In the notes to his translation of the *Phenapiṇḍūpama Sutta*, Bodhi provides some explanation, referring to this text as “one of the most radical discourses on the empty nature of conditioned phenomena.”<sup>65</sup> While alluding to the general discourse on emptiness by stating that the imagery was later predominantly used by the Mādhyamika tradition, he warns against an “illusionist sense of the world,” interpreting the text’s intention to simply “show that our conceptions of the world, and of our existence, are largely distorted by the process of cognition.” Ontologically speaking, he argues that the illusion is still “based on real existents,” which is effectively in fact an interpretation of the Theravādin commentarial position, rather than a necessary reading of the *sutta* per se. This is more clearly laid out when Bodhi refers to the Pāli commentary on the SN, the *Sāratthappakāsinī* (Spk):

Cognition is like a magical illusion (*māyā*) in the sense that it is insubstantial and cannot be grasped. Cognition is even more transient and fleeting than a magical illusion. For it gives the impression that a person comes and goes, stands and sits, with the same mind, but the mind is different in each of these activities. Cognition deceives the multitude like a magical illusion (*māyā*).<sup>66</sup>

This is couched in the technical Abhidhammic language of the commentaries, specifically referring to such doctrinal tenets as impermanence, substantiality, momentariness, and the continuity of the mind. It relies quite specifically on the notion of an “illusion” as the work of a magician, a visual perception or apparition of a person which cannot be physically—substantially—grasped.



From the Northern tradition, we may also turn to the mid-period *Sarvāstivādin* work the *\*Vasumitrabodhisattvasaṃgraha Śāstra*. This compendium also comments on the *Phenapiṇḍa Sūtra*, describing each of them as misperceptions of a “self” (*wuwo* 吾我 *ātman*):

As the Blessed One said: “The phenomenon of cognition is like an illusion; this was said in the ultimate sense.” When this was said, what is the meaning? Answer:... “The phenomenon of cognition is like an illusion”—this is like an illusionist, with respect to what lacks a sentient being there is the perception of a sentient being. The cognition of a Self is just so. Therefore it is said: “Cognition is like an illusion.” “Ultimate” is a type of explanation, therefore it is said to be an ultimate expression.<sup>67</sup>

The metaphor is not analyzed as literally as that found in the Theravādin commentary. The meaning is clear, however, that cognition is an illusion means that it is not a “Self” (*ātman*). This is perhaps more basic than the Theravādin use of “substantiality,” which became later more heavily emphasized.

The early *Phenapiṇḍupama Sutta* also featured three adjectives, namely void (*ritta*), hollow (*tuccha*), and coreless (*asāra*). The mainstream Buddhism period also continues the usage of these terms to describe what is not only empty, but also insignificant, worthless, vain, and false. In the *Theravādin* commentaries, a *rittamuṭṭhi* is an “empty fist,” and *rittahattha* or *tucchahattha* is an “empty hand.” This empty hand or fist is often said to “deceive a childish fool,” implying the ignorance (*bala*) of the misperception.<sup>68</sup> Likewise too, in *SĀ* 591, sensual desires are described as “false, unsubstantial, deceptive *dharma*s; illusory, like the deception of a small child.”<sup>69</sup> Quite possibly, it was this *SĀ* text that was later picked up on by the *Satyasiddhi Śāstra*, which also describes the impermanency of the “impure body” as an illusion to fool a small child.<sup>70</sup>

A note on some of the commentarial literature preserved in Chinese is perhaps in order at this point. Within Xūánzàng’s translations of the Abhidharma literature, the most common term of translation of the terms *asāra(ka)*, *rikta(ka)*, and *tuccha(ka)* appears to be either *kong* 空 or *xū* 虛. This means that without identifying parallel phrases in the Pāli or Sanskrit, the possible ambiguity with *śūnya* (C. *kong* 空) is often unavoidable, and difficult to decisively resolve. For example, such potentially ambiguous phrases include: “when I abandon this life, I shall be empty and gain nothing in the Masters dispensation”;<sup>71</sup> also “towards the holy teaching he made the ignorant statement, empty, without result”; and “‘empty’: reveals the lack of the womb of the holy path, like when a woman cannot conceive a child, ‘empty and bereft’ of a child, she is called ‘barren’.”<sup>72</sup> All

of these passages imply the lack of fruitful, beneficial result. These terms are also used to indicate that a statement or argument is without meaning and baseless.<sup>73</sup> This sense is not new, however, as it reflects what we have already seen in the *Ṛg Veda* verse 10:71:5, for example.

Apart from the above texts, which seem to have developed from the *Phenapiṇḍūpama Sutta*’s “cognition like an illusion,” “void,” “hollow” and “coreless,” there are several independent mainstream *sūtras* to be examined in their own light.

### Metaphor of the Hand Clap (\**Hastatāḍopama*)

The first mainstream *sūtra* for our examination, is the \**Hastatāḍopama Sūtra*, which derives its name from the metaphor of two hands clapping to produce a sound. The text features a brief passage that utilizes the metaphor of an illusion. The extant Chinese version, *sūtra* SĀ 273, states:

Monks! All conditionings are like an illusion (*māyā*), like a flame [mirage] (*marici*). In a moment they cease to be, they have no real coming or real going.<sup>74</sup>

This passage continues to describe conditionings (*saṃskārā*) as being devoid, or empty, of anything permanent, substantial, or not subject to change and alteration.

We have two later commentaries that cite this text. The first commentary is the *Nyānānusāra Śāstra*, which cites and comments on this *sūtra*, also saying: “All formations are like an illusion, like a flame [mirage]; they abide for a short duration, and then swiftly pass away and cease.”<sup>75</sup> The second commentary has been adroitly identified by Yinshun in a portion of the *Yogācārabhūmi Śāstra* that gives an analytical explanation for each of the descriptive phrases in the *sūtra*.<sup>76</sup> The explanation of “illusion” states: “These formations are not established as real due to their differences of arisen own-substance in the various destinies (*gati*), therefore they are said to be ‘like an illusion (*māya*).’”<sup>77</sup> Thus, here the idea of “illusory” means specifically the rejection of substance.

### Net of Illusion (*Māyājāla*)

The second such mainstream *sūtra* we shall examine is the *Māyājāla Sūtra*, the “Illusion Net.” This is one of a range of *Āgama sūtras* that are part of a category of texts known as the *Mahāsūtras* within the (Mūla)Sarvāstivādin tradition.<sup>78</sup> The *Māyājāla* was most likely within the *Dirthāgama* collection of this school, and is thus similarly titled to the well-known *Brahmajāla*.<sup>79</sup>

In the form in which it is now preserved, only in Tibetan, it most likely dates from around the beginning of the Common Era.<sup>80</sup> Skilling also shows how the metaphors of illusion and so forth in the *Mahāsūtras* became prototypes for such metaphors in a number of Mahāyāna *sūtras*.<sup>81</sup>

The *Māyājāla* first covers stock taxonomies of the three trainings (*śikṣa*), the inversions (*viparyāsa*), the body-bonds (*kāyagrantha*), and yokes (*saṃyojana*). It then presents twelve metaphors in two sets of six, related to each of the six types of sensory cognition, from visual to mental. (This is also as the *\*Hastatāḍopama Sūtra*, below.) The second set of six includes two types of “illusion” (*māyā*), namely, an illusory army, an echo, an image in a mirror, a mirage, a dream, and illusory ornaments. The first and last metaphors are alike, in that both are the conjurations of a magician, who is a creator of illusions (*māyākāra*).<sup>82</sup> We may tabulate the two sets of six as follows:

Sense:	Metaphor Group A:	Metaphor Group B:
Forms	madman wandering naked	illusory army
Sounds	drunkard who sleeps with his mother	echo
Odors	man pursued by assassin	reflection in mirror
Tastes	spiteful disciple	mirage
Tactiles	man harassed by bandits	sense pleasures in a dream
Mentals	basket of snakes	illusory ornaments

It is the six metaphors of Group B that draw our attention in particular. Skilling provides alternate sources for all six metaphors.<sup>83</sup> We have already seen the “illusory army” as the specific illusion metaphor for cognition in the SĀ 265 version of the *Phenapiṇḍa Sūtra* (see above). The “mirage” is also the metaphor for perceptions in all versions of that text. Skilling only finds parallels in the Mahāyāna *Samdhinirmocana* and *Suvaraṇaprabhāsa sūtras*, though there are other similarities with the *Śālistamba Sūtra* in terms of phraseology and use of the “mirror” metaphor.<sup>84</sup>

Thus, metaphors involving illusions (*māyā*) and illusionist magicians (*māyākāra*) appear twice in the text. Skilling states that “[t]he conjuring up of illusory ornaments should be routine in the repertoire of any respectable magician.”<sup>85</sup> It is explained that after cognition of an object through the senses, various types of perceptive, cognitive, and conceptual error arise through the inversions (*viparyāsa*) of perception (*saṃjñā°*), mind (*citta°*), and view (*dṛṣṭi°*), respectively. Where the illusory object does not in fact exist—an *ātman* cannot be apprehended—the various perceptions and cognitions beguile the observer into such a belief and frame of mind. The significance of

the metaphors thus appears to be a rejection of permanence, eternality, and so forth in sensory objects, which, in practical terms, is the world of experience.

Quite possibly due to its importance as one of the *Mahāsūtras*, the *Māyājāla Sūtra* was later cited by a number of commentarial texts. Most of these are later than the early Mahāyāna, but are still worth mentioning to see how they were perceived in the various traditions.<sup>86</sup>

1. The Sautrāntika-influenced Mahāsāṃghika text, the *\*Satyasiddhi Śāstra*, cites the *sūtra* as stating: “There is the illusion and the illusory object, in the absence of a living being there is the appearance of a living being; thus it is said to be an ‘illusion.’”<sup>87</sup>
2. The *Nyānānusāra Śāstra*, an orthodox Vaibhāṣika response to Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharma Kośa* and *Bhāṣya*. The statement “seeing an illusory object” in the *sūtra* is cited and explained as follows:<sup>88</sup>

“Seeing an illusory object (*māyā*)”: Although what one apprehends is unreal, nothing more than an illusory sign. If one does not admit this much, then an illusory sign should be non-existent. What is an illusory sign? It is the result of illusion magic. Just as one with higher gnosis can magically create forms, likewise this illusory sign does actually have manifestation and shape. Being produced by illusion magic, it acts as the object of vision. That object which is taken as really existent is in fact ultimately non-existent. Therefore, this [*Māyājāla*] *Sūtra* states that it is non-existent, due to the illusory object there is a sign but not substantiality. Being able to beguile and deceive one, it is known as a “deceiver of the eye.”<sup>89</sup>

An illusory object, the product of magic, can act as a cognitive object. However, in terms of its substantiality, it does not exist as such. A cognitive deception thus occurs, one believes in a real object where no such thing exists. This is the same notion as that found in the *\*Hastatāḍopama Sūtra*.

Elsewhere in the *Nyānānusāra Śāstra*, the *sūtra* is cited again, but in the context of refuting its perceived misinterpretation by the Sautrāntikas or Dārṣṭāntikas:

They mistakenly cite scripture, claiming: “The Buddha told his erudite holy disciples: ‘You should now train in this manner: Within all these forms cognized by the eye, whether past, future or present, there is no permanence, eternality; and so forth, up to; no non-inversionality. Apart from the holy truths, all are false, unreal *dharmas*.’”<sup>90</sup>

This position basically considers that the four truths alone are real, other phenomena being false. Note in particular that the former category includes

not just such *dharma*s as the aggregates and their causes, but also cessation (*nirodha*)—basically just a synonym for *nirvāṇa*—as well. The Sautrāntikas or Dārṣṭāntikas are criticized as “habitually familiarizing themselves with secular classics which often cite blind metaphors.”<sup>91</sup> While which specific “classics” remains unknown, this certainly implies that such metaphors were common knowledge even in the secular world of the time.

3. From the later Vijñaptimātra tradition, the \**Vijñaptisiddhiratnajāta Śāstra* (preserved only in Chinese) also cites the *Māyājāla*. Following our cited passage above, but after “there is no permanence,” it appends,

without any permanent fixed nature, without deceptivity, without any unaltering substantial object which can be apprehended, either as it exists, or without inversion; they are all non-existent; with the only exception of the transmundane of the holy ones, which is established as truly real.<sup>92</sup>

In short, all mundane *dharma*s are false and unreal, they do not have any permanent, eternal or non-altering substantiality that can be apprehended. The “transmundane” again refers to the truth of cessation (or possibly both cessation and the path).

### Rice Stalk (*Śalistamba*) and the *Mahāvastu*

A third sectarian *sūtra* of note is the *Śalistamba Sūtra*. We shall look at this together with some short passages from a fourth text, the *Mahāvastu*, due to the likely common provenance of these two texts. That is, both are associated with the Mahāsāṃghika tradition.<sup>93</sup>

The *Śalistamba Sūtra* also puts a greater emphasis on cognition as an illusion, over the metaphors for the first four aggregates. It describes *dharma*s without self as being mutually conditioning and thus “characterized as illusory”; with a connection between origination from causes and conditions and their illusory and deceptive nature, their lack of substantiality.<sup>94</sup> They are also to be viewed as “vain, hollow, without core,” and so forth.<sup>95</sup> This is similar to the pericope found in describing all five aggregates within the *Phenapiṇḍa Sūtra*.

Reat’s comments that this drift toward the illusory in the *Śalistamba Sūtra* “justifies its classification as a Mahāyāna *sūtra*” is problematic.<sup>96</sup> It seems to overlook the content of the various *Sarvāstivādin sūtras* we have cited here, and given the date of this text vis-à-vis the *Mahāyāna*. Attribution of the *Śalistamba* to the Mahāsāṃghika alone may thus be equally problematic and not clear cut.

The *Mahāvastu*, a highly influential Mahāsāṃghikan text on the life of the Buddha, is also worth considering in a similar manner to the *Śālistamba*. Early in the text, a brief allusion to the aggregates is made in a similar fashion to that found in the *Phenapiṇḍa Sūtra*: The Buddha “has shown that the aggregates are like a lightning flash, as a bubble, or as the white foam on a wave.”<sup>97</sup> This text also views all *dharma*s in a similar manner to the *Phenapiṇḍa* when it uses the stock descriptive pericope, describing them all as “hollow, void and coreless.”<sup>98</sup> If we may make a technical distinction, the aggregates are typically regarded as “conditioned,” whereas the second passage refers to “all *dharma*s,” which would include the unconditioned.

These two passages in the *Mahāvastu* are both very short, providing little or no technical analysis or exegesis of their doctrinal import. The *Mahāvastu* is, after all, a biographical or rather hagiographical text, as opposed to the analytical methodology found in certain later *sūtras* or Abhidharma *sāstras*. This is significant, however, for it indicates that such stock pericopes had obviously entered into the usual rhetoric of more popular and literary proponents of the various schools. Their potential to influence later traditions, such as the incipient Mahāyāna, due to the widespread appeal of such literature, should not be overlooked.

### Semantic Field Analysis for the Mainstream Period

Having covered the mainstream textual sources and their use of the illusion metaphor, we may now apply Kittay’s perspectival analysis approach through examining the semantic fields of both topics and vehicles to understand on a deeper level how the metaphor continued to develop.

Most of the mainstream material that seems to closely parallel the *Phenapiṇḍa* provides little or no difference from what we understand to be the earliest form of the text (§○). One difference in the EĀ 35:9 version, while slight, may prove to have quite some significance. That difference is the implication that “*all* conditionings” are to be so contemplated.

Likewise too for the *Lalitavistara* 13:98 passage, from the highly Abhidharmic-influenced Sarvāstivāda tradition. This reminds us that the mainstream period often analyzed phenomena into the two mutually exclusive categories of conditioned and unconditioned. While unstated in either of these text themselves, it does beg the question: How, then, should the unconditioned be contemplated? In terms of semantic fields, we may at this point add to our superset list of taxonomies of all things:

< < < *Taxonomies of all things* >: 5 aggregates, 12 sense spheres, 18 elements, conditioned and unconditioned, etc. > >

Thus, if the early correspondence between each of these taxonomies and “sets of selfless / empty things” remains, then both conditioned and unconditioned phenomena are still selfless or empty, and thus metaphorically void, hollow, and coreless. On the other hand, if the earlier taxonomies are now no longer considered to be fully exhaustive sets of “all things,” then apart from connecting the five (or more) metaphors for void, hollow, and coreless, that is, selfless, we would then have a new set split off from this. That set would be unconditioned things, and the fact of their not being like coreless illusions would entail that they possessed substantial core selves.

We see this new distinction highlighted in the passage from the *\*Hastatāḍopama*, and its subsequent Abhidharmic and Yogācārin commentaries, which explicitly use the term *conditionings* (*saṃskārā*) as the topic content field for the metaphor of “illusion” and “mirage” (§0).

Structurally, the *Māyājāla Sūtra*’s use of two sets of six metaphors for the twelve sense spheres (*āyatana*) can be seen as an equivalent to the *Phenapiṇḍa*’s metaphors for the five aggregates, in that both the sense spheres and aggregates were early Buddhist exhaustive taxonomies for all phenomena (§0). However, while the *Phenapiṇḍa* outlined the qualities of the vehicle metaphors as void, hollow, and coreless before equating this to the coreless or insubstantial nature of the aggregates as topic, the *Māyājāla* does not appear to explain the specific characteristics of the vehicle metaphors, but merely connects the twelve metaphorical terms to the deceptive nature of sensory cognition—the topic. The topic aggregates are then said to be wrongly cognized as having a self where none exists, thus implying that this is the sense of the vehicle metaphors.

< < *Deceptive cognitions of a self* >: the twelve sense spheres [, the five aggregates, the eighteen elements, etc.] >

The two sets of six thus come together as a nonexhaustive contrast set of hyponyms which we can put under the covering set of “wrong cognitions.” No doubt further metaphors could be continually appended to this list.

< < *Deceptive cognitions* >: madman wandering naked, illusory army, drunkard who sleeps with his mother, echo, man pursued by assassin, reflection in mirror, spiteful disciple, mirage, man harassed by bandits, sense pleasures in a dream, basket of snakes, illusory ornaments[, etc.] >

Whereas the *\*Hastatāḍopama* makes explicit the taxonomic distinction between conditioned and unconditioned, making only the former the topic field for the metaphor of “illusion,” the commentaries to the *Māyājāla*

make another division, which was becoming more predominant in some mainstream schools. In the Sarvāstivādin *Nyānānusāra* and Vijñānavādin *\*Vijñaptisiddhiratnajāta* commentaries on these passages, the holy truths themselves as not false and unreal. They are not within the content domain of the illusion metaphor. Though this itself seems problematic with respect to the earlier tradition—for how could the truths of dissatisfaction and its origin, so often described as the aggregates themselves, not thus be considered metaphorically as illusions in the sense of being selfless? It could be a shift of the content field of the term *illusion*, from “selfless” to “deception.” That what is other than the four holy truths is unreal is not the topic for the metaphor of illusion as being selfless, but as being deceptive cognitions. In Abhidharmic cognicentric soteriology, cognitions of the truths lead to realization and liberation, whereas cognitions of other mundane phenomena lead to further bondage.

Since the early tradition had steadfastly held to the point that all phenomena were selfless, even *nirvāṇa*, the unconditioned, was also to be so regarded. This was a position that the Abhidharma traditions also maintained; after all, it was perhaps one of the key features that distinguished the Buddhists from other religious traditions during this period of systematically outlining the teachings. The original sense of the illusion metaphor as selfless could thus not be restricted to only some phenomena, but had to apply to all. But the mainstream traditions that took the Abhidharma as their bottom line gradually moved the unconditioned and/or the four holy truths themselves out of the scope of the of the “illusion” metaphor, unwilling to have direct realization of the truth described as “illusory” in nature, even metaphorically so. Not only did the content fields containing various taxonomies of “all phenomena” become split, with a newly analyzed portion of the unconditioned being removed from the topic referents of the metaphoric vehicle, but with greater usage of metaphor specifically related to cognition, the newly split off unconditioned and/or holy truths could now be seen as true or real cognitions. Thus, the sense of illusion as a cognitive deception took center stage, and it was *not* universally applicable.

In the same historical period yet outside these Abhidharmic-based traditions, from the Mahāsāṃghika texts such as the *Śālistamba* and *Mahāvastu*, we see less analytical precision in the classification of phenomena (§o). The *Śālistamba* provides little greater depth over and above that of the *Phenapiṇḍa*. While it does use the broad term *dharmas* rather than just “conditionings” (*saṃskārā*), it does not specify if the classification is considered to encompass all (*sarva*) phenomena or only some part thereof. The *Mahāvastu* features an ambiguity we have already raised: the first mention of the illusion metaphor refers explicitly to the aggregates, and



while adding the metaphor of a “lightning flash,” appears to otherwise be sourced from the *Phenapiṇḍa*. The second reference to the metaphor refers to “all phenomena,” but the fact that they are described with the three terms *void*, *hollow*, and *coreless* strongly suggests that this is also from the *Phenapiṇḍa*. It thus implicitly indicates that for the authors, the set of five aggregates—which are doubtless conditioned—still exhausts the content range of all things, that the unconditioned is not something distinct and other than this and perhaps other taxonomies. In both cases, the usage of the illusion metaphor by both the *Śālistamba* and *Mahāvastu* appears closer to that of the early tradition, unaffected by Ābhidharmic type analysis of phenomena, in particular into the conditioned and unconditioned, the holy truths and mundane unrealities.

Finally, in our analysis of these metaphors in the mainstream period, we must return again to some of the material that bears the sense of falsity, deception, and lack of substantial result. This includes references from EĀ 26:7, the metaphors of “a snowball,” “a lump of dirt,” and so forth, and also that found in the Abhidharma commentarial material, such as “a barren woman.” These sets are somewhat mixed, in that they sometimes parallel the set of “void, hollow, coreless things” from the *Phenapiṇḍa*, but are also sometimes akin to the list of “deceptions” found in the *Sutta Nipāta*. Is there any relationship between these two types? It would seem fair to say that we seldom see natural phenomena such as foam or a bubble as a “deception,” though we may for a “mirage.” We are more inclined to apply this notion to deliberate human actions, however, such as the “empty hand” to deceive a child, or false, vain, or hypocritical speech. Perhaps, like the “magician” (*māyākāra*), the later deliberate human action involves an agent (*°katr*) or actor (*°kāra*), whereas the natural phenomena or foam and bubbles do not. But we must recall that foam and bubbles were originally metaphors for things without substantial cores, not specifically for any sort of deceptions whatsoever.

#### GROWN UP “ILLUSION”: EARLY *PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ*

In the previous two sections we covered the notion of “illusion” in two doctrinal historical periods, that of early Buddhism and that of the mainstream schools. Only now are we in a position to return to the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, and reflect in particular on such statements as “even *nirvāṇa* is like an illusion” that first initiated our investigation. The *Prajñāpāramitā* is a huge literary genre, so considerations of which material will be most productive is an important question. Conze’s emphasis on this passage from chapter 1 of the text in particular—whether in the prose *Aṣṭa* or verse *Rgs*—is most likely also connected to his own historical critical



analysis of the texts. In the nine stages of historical development outlined by Conze, we see the first: Stage 1, the initial formulation represented by the first two chapters of the *Ratnaguṇasamcaya Gāthā* (*Rgs*), the “ur-*sūtra*”; and second: Stage 2, chapters 3–28 of *Rgs* and corresponding material in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*.<sup>99</sup> Thus, he would consider this statement that “even *nirvāṇa* is like an illusion” to hail from the earliest strata of the entire genre. Other scholars such as Hikata, Schmithausen, and Yinshun have also sought an “ur-*sūtra*” in the text, also often resolving on the first one or two chapters of the *Rgs* and *Aṣṭa*.<sup>100</sup>

As such, the first two chapters—what we shall call the “prologue”—of the *Rgs* verses and *Aṣṭa* prose shall be the first material that we shall examine here, three passages in total. For the text in prose, the early Chinese translations are very important, considering that our present Sanskrit text is certainly a much later version, with additional content and other minor doctrinal alterations.

The notion of *dharma*s as “illusions” (*māyā*), or related compounds, features in the text at *Rgs* verses 1:14, 1:19 and also 2:5 (especially in recension A), and parallel *Aṣṭa* prose passages. These passages are in turn related to the adjacent material in preceding and subsequent verses about conceptualization (*sūtra*: *saṃjñā*; *Rgs*: *pari-√kṛp*). In this position, the verses on conceptualization form a basic framing element around the central climax of the first two chapters—definitions of *bodhisattva*, *mahāsattva*, and *mahāyāna*—making it structurally significant.<sup>101</sup> How does the *sūtra* prologue understand and use this idea?

### “He knows the five aggregates as like an illusion”

At *Rgs* verses 1:13 and *sūtra* equivalents states that “in the way in which *dharma*s exist (*saṃvidyante*), just so do they not exist (*asaṃvidyante*),” not knowing this is ignorance (*avidyā*). People who conceptualize (*√kṛp*) *dharma*s as either “existent” or “nonexistent” neither see nor know *dharma*s as they really are, and are unable to go out (*nir-√yā*) from the triple world.<sup>102</sup> Continuing from there, what follows at *Rgs* verses 1:14 and prose, brings up the notion of “like illusion”:

If he knows the five aggregates as like an illusion,  
But makes not illusion one thing, and the aggregates another;  
If, freed from the notion of multiple things, he courses in peace—  
Then that is his practice of wisdom, the highest perfection.<sup>103</sup>

In the prose *sūtra*,<sup>104</sup> the Buddha asks Subhūti whether the aggregates are one thing and illusion another. Subhūti replies that they are not other, and



affirms that the aggregates are themselves illusion, moreover, he states that the term *bodhisattva* is merely a name given to these aggregates.

Following this is an obscure passage with many variant readings, though the general idea is that in the manner in which the five aggregates are like illusions, so too are the six sense organs. Both the five aggregates and six sense organs being standard taxonomies for “the all” (*sarva*) among all Buddhist schools. The variant readings are noteworthy, however: The *Dāmingdù(A)* seems to cite the Buddha’s statement that “cognition is like an illusion,” from the *Pheṇapiṇḍūpama Sutta* and other early *sūtra* sources. It also states that the mind (S. *manas*, C. *yì* 意) is the triple world, and that the triple world is the six sense faculties, a statement that is interesting in the light of the definition of the *mahāyāna* as “going out (*nir-√yā*) from the triple world.”<sup>105</sup> The *Chāojīng* adds that the five aggregates are “all empty, nonexistent” (*jie kong wusuoyou* 皆空無所有), and thus mere names and designations. What we can make of all these variants, is that there was still enough room in interpretation of the various transmitted versions of the small *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* to lead the transmitters of the text to add their own glosses into the text itself.

The statement at *Rgs* 1:13 and equivalent *Aṣṭa* prose seems to echo the next verse, *Rgs* 1:14, in that the notion of “the aggregates are illusion” is equivalent to conceptualizing *dharma*s as either existence or nonexistence. The emphasis on the role of the mind in some texts may reflect the role of mental conceptualization in the process of ignorant misattribution of substantiality or existence/nonexistence, to what is in fact neither.

“This gnosis shows him all beings as like an illusion”

The second citation in the *sūtra* prologue is on the other side of the core definition of *bodhisattva*. Subsequently in the definition of *mahāsattva*, the *Rgs* verses 1:19 state:

This gnosis shows him all beings as like an illusion,  
Resembling a great crowd of people, conjured up at the crossroads, By  
a magician, who then cuts off many thousands of heads; He knows this  
whole living world as a magical creation, and yet remains without fear.<sup>106</sup>

Here in the prose *sūtra* it is stated that there are no beings led to *nirvāṇa*, with a metaphor given of a magician (*māyākāra*: “illusion-maker”) who cuts off the heads of his illusorily created persons—in fact, no person at all is killed! Reflecting on the material in verse *Rgs* 1:16, we see the cutting off of all forms of attachment;<sup>107</sup> and also in verse *Rgs* 1:17, which states that “And of a great number of people they cut off mistaken views”;<sup>108</sup> together these



two earlier verses imply that attachment and the view of a living being is the “head” which is to be decapitated in *Rgs* 1:19. Immediately following, at *Rgs* 1:20 and the corresponding *Aṣṭa* prose, the idea of the “illusory person” (*māyāpuruṣa*) again appears when explaining that the five aggregates and the suchness of the five aggregates, “are neither bound nor released.” Apart from the variant readings we have already mentioned above, the text gives little direct explanation.

The material at *Rgs* 1:20–21 and equivalent in prose defines *bodhiyāna* (in the *Rgs*) or *mahāyāna* (in the *Aṣṭa*). It deals with the perception (*saṃjñā*) of the *bodhisattva* path as a difficult practice (*duṣkaraṃcar*), and also the non-arising (*anutpāda*) of the *dharma*s of *bodhisattva*s, common persons, and all gnosis itself. The *Rgs* 1:25–26 passages, which define *mahāsattva*, do seem more in tune with the idea here, dealing with the conceptualization of self and living being, and also conceptualization of arising and non-arising.<sup>109</sup>

If we reflect upon this with respect to *Rgs* 1:13–14, it would seem reasonable to understand the “head” to be mental conceptualization, which should be cut off. This would match perfectly with *Rgs* 17–18, where *Rgs* 1:17 has “cut off self-view” (*ātmadrṣṭi chindati*). It would also lead to an equivalence between “self-view” of the person at *Rgs* 1:17–18, and existence/nonexistence views of *dharma*s at *Rgs* 1:19–20–21. It also suggests a relationship between the pair of existence/nonexistence at *Rgs* 17–18, and arising/non-arising at *Rgs* 1:19–20, both of course being conceptualizations. Any of these paired forms of incorrect conceptualization is the “illusion.”

“Fruition...*nirvāṇa*...all is born of illusion”

The above two uses of “illusion” in the prologue, focusing around *Rgs* 1:14 and 1:19, parallel each other around the definitions of *bodhisattva* and *mahāsattva*, forming a frame as it were. But additionally, we also have further prologue material at *Rgs* 2:5 and corresponding *Aṣṭa* prose *sūtra* material.<sup>110</sup> Here we find our “shocking” statement: it is said that one who listens to Subhūti’s *Prajñāpāramitā* should be like an illusory creation (*māyānirmita*); moreover, all *dharma*s, even up to and including *nirvāṇa*, are like an illusion. The *Rgs* verses 2:5 state:

Those who teach Dharma, and those who listen when it is being taught;  
Those who have won the fruition of a Worthy One, a Solitary Buddha,  
or a World Savior; And the *nirvāṇa* obtained by the wise and learned—  
All is born of illusion—so has the Tathāgata declared.<sup>111</sup>

Let us first compare the various witnesses for this oft-cited passage. The *Daoxing*, *Dà míng dū*(A), and *Chāojīng* also describe these phenomena as “all empty, all nonexistent” (jiē kōng wú suǒ yǒu 皆空無所有). Conze’s translation

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above as “Mere illusions, mere dreams” is no doubt based on his use of recension B, which has “*māya-ja*,” “born of illusion.” Recension B also has “*māya-ja dharmata*” in the first line of this verse, *Rgs* 2:5a, which is entirely absent from recension A.<sup>112</sup> Recension A verse 2:5d has instead “*ātma-ja*,” literally “self-born,” which has the basic meaning of “son,” that is, born from oneself. This is also how the Tibetan has taken it.<sup>113</sup> However, a lexicographical definition of “originating from intellect” appears in the Monier-Williams dictionary, in other words, what springs forth from one’s own subjective basis. The reading of *māya-ja*, and the lexicographical definition of *ātmaja*, are very much in line with the notion of *parikalpa* (and *saṃjñā*, etc.) in *Rgs* 1:20, that is to say, a mere notion without substantial reality. Where the earlier texts here have “all empty, nonexistent,” the later texts from the *Xiāopīn* onward state that these *dharmas* are also like a “dream” (*svapna*), and are “not two” (*advaya*) and “not divided” (*advaidhikāra*) with respect to the illusion or dream.<sup>114</sup> But here, the notion of “nondual” also appears in the *Dāmíngdù*(A) as *wu er shi* 無二事 (“without two things”), and also in the later texts.

Still, this third reference to “illusion” fits with our conclusions for the earlier two references, which frame the definitions at the center of the *sūtra* prologue. Following the earlier texts, we may also conclude that “all empty, nonexistent” refers not to the negating half of the dualistic positions of non-/existence and non-/arising, but to the absence of both sides of the conceptualized dualistic pair. This absence of conceptualization shows *dharmas* as they truly are, empty of fabrication but not fabricated as “empty.” Several scholars have given much attention to the fact that this passage appears to reject some sort of Abhidharma theory of *nirvāṇa*. We may now appreciate that the emphasis is on rejection of conceptualization of any *dharmas*, rather than merely rejection of a substantial *nirvāṇa*. Even conceptualization of an insubstantial *nirvāṇa* would miss the point. We may also suggest that this is represented in a relationship between this “illusion” on one hand, and the “signless” *saṃādhi* practice of the *bodhisattvas* on the other. The *sūtra* prologue considers that any conceptualization through the aforementioned dualities is the creation of the illusion, in which one interacts with signs, which obstruct insight.

### The Buddha’s Body Is Like an Illusory Creation

Above we examined material on “illusion” in the prologue of the text, which is considered by many scholars to be the ur-*sūtra*, thus giving it considerable weight for interpretation of the text. While these scholars also largely consider that the *Avadāna* of Sadāprarudita at the end of the text to be the latest addition, Vaidya instead claims that



“Dharmodgata’s sermon to Sadāprarudita...appears to me the oldest and simplest form of the doctrine”.<sup>115</sup> This sermon lies at the heart of the *Avadāna*, and also features a number of metaphors, including “illusions.” The sermon concerns the nature of the Buddha’s body, and is a response by Dharmodgata to Sadāprarudita on the question, “From where do the Tathāgata’s come? To where do they go?” This question was in turn prompted by Sadāprarudita’s visions and auditory perceptions of the Buddhas on his quest for *Prajñāpāramitā*.<sup>116</sup> The earliest version of the text, the *Dàoxíng*, states:

Dharmodgata Bodhisattva replied: “Emptiness does not come (*na... āgacchanti*) from anywhere, and does not go (*na...gacchanti*) to anywhere; so too the Buddha (= Tathāgata) [does not come from anywhere, and does not go to anywhere].”<sup>117</sup>

This same form of expression is continued, as “Just as X neither comes nor goes, so too the Tathāgata (*fo* 佛) neither comes nor goes,” where “X” is repeated for a long list of sixteen terms: (1) “emptiness” (S. *śūnyatā*, C. *kong* 空) as cited above; *Damingdu(B)* adds: (2) “intentionless” (S. *apraṇihita*, C. *wuyüan* 無願); (3) “signless” (S. *animitta*, C. *wuxiang* 無想 / *wuxiang* 無相); (4) “baseless” (S. *avastu*, C. *wuchusuo* 無處所); (5) “non-arising” (S. *anutpāda*, C. *wusucongsheng* 無所從生<sup>118</sup>); (6) “invisible” (S. *asamdeśa*, C. *wuxing* 無形); (7) “illusion” (S. *māyākāranirmita*, C. *huan* 幻); (8) “mirage” (S. *marīci*, C. *yiema* 野馬); (9) “person in a dream” (S. *svapnapuruṣa*, C. *mengzhong ren* 夢中人); (10) “*nirvāṇa*” (C. *niepan* 涅槃); (11) “mental image” (S. *pratibhāsa*, C. *xiangxiang* 想像); (12) “non-born” (S. *ajata*, C. *wu[you]sheng* 無[有]生); (13) “non-growing” (C. *wu[you]zhang* 無[有]長); (14) “non-attachment” (S. *anabhinirviśya*, C. *wusuoshi* 無所適<sup>119</sup>); (15) “empty space” (S. *ākāśa[dhātu]*, C. *xükong* 虛空) (16) “*dharma* element” (S. *dharmadhātu*, C. *jing[fal]jie* 經[法]界);<sup>120</sup> (17) “former extent” (S. *pūrvānta*, *pariyavasāna*, C. *benduan* 本端). Later versions of the text—the *Xiaopin*, *Fomu*, Sanskrit, and Tibetan—lack this material.

After the beginning of the central sermon, the later texts immediately continue by offering metaphors to illustrate the point. We see the equivalent in the *Daoxing* and *Damingdu(B)* only near to the end of the *Avadāna*, where the list of metaphors includes: (1) lute; (2) pipe; (3) Buddha body images; (4) drum; (5) painting; (6) palaces of the *devas* (= city of the *gandharva*); (7) echo; and (8) magically created (illusory) person.<sup>121</sup> The meaning ascribed to them is that each comes about due to a number of factors, and hence does not come from nor go to some location in and of itself. The examples are then tied in with the various meritorious deeds required to become a fully awakened Buddha. In the



later texts, these metaphors are: (1) mirage (*marīci*); (2) illusory creations (*māyākāranirmita*); and (3) dream experiences (*svapna*). All of these are also said to “neither come nor go,” while merely appearing to do so. The list continues with: (4) jewels in the ocean (*mahāsamudre ratnāni*); and (5) sound from a lute (*viṇāyāḥ śabda*); both of which are described more explicitly in terms of dependent origination. They neither come nor go in the sense of real entities (*bhūta*, *svabhāva*), but appear and cease when the requisite causal conditions (*hetupratyaya*) are present or not. Again, all of these are metaphors to answer the question of how “the Tathāgatas neither come nor go”—they have no existence in real terms (*nāsti*), but are unreal (*abhūt*) and false (*mṛṣā*), amounting to mere conceptualization (*√kṛp*).

Entwined within these *Avadāna* metaphors is the description of the Tathāgatas themselves, explaining not only how they “neither come nor go,” but also how they are to be known, how they are to be both seen and heard. The *Daoxing* expresses this repeatedly in each of the metaphors for the Buddha’s body and voice as “Good Sir! If you wish to know [= see?] the body of the Buddha, it is like this!” or likewise for “[hearing?] the voice of the Buddha.”<sup>122</sup> The two subjects of “body” and “voice” fit very well with the “call” at the beginning of the *Avadāna*, where Sadāprarudita first “hears” voices, and then “sees” the body of an apparitional Buddha. The metaphors used to elucidate this are thus also of two kinds, those related to visual objects which are seen—such as the mirage, painting, and illusion; and those that are heard—such as the lute, pipe, and drum.<sup>123</sup> Both types of metaphor, either pertaining to vision or to sound, indicate that what is perceived is the result of dependent conditions. This is known by various synonyms, hence the different lists among the witnesses. Of these synonyms for dependency, “suchness” (*tathatā*) is the most important one, for that is the term that is able to bring about the climax of the whole *Avadāna* itself, vis-à-vis the “Tathāgata,” who “neither comes nor goes.”

### Semantic Field Analysis for the Early *PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ*

As for our previous two sections on early Buddhism and the mainstream traditions, we shall now analyze the use of the “illusion” metaphor in this early *Prajñāpāramitā* material, through application of Kittay’s semantic fields of the metaphors involved, including both the referenced topic and vehicle metaphor.

The verse *Rgs* 1:14 (§0) takes the stock five aggregates as the topic, but rather than five vehicle metaphors as the *Phenapiṇḍa*, it only uses the “illusion” vehicle metaphor. Whether or not the aggregates are considered

an exhaustive field of all things is not stated. Likewise, the sense of the metaphor is not explicitly stated as being void, hollow, and coreless, which in the *Phenapiṇḍa* is the idea that connects back to the aggregates as coreless, meaning selfless. Here, our vehicle semantic field has been reduced in content, and we must ascertain its covering term by considering its earlier uses in this linguistic community, and also how the term is used elsewhere in this text. The appearance of the metaphor in other parts of the text will provide some insights here.

This brings us to the second verse, *Rgs* 1:19 (§o), which also only uses the metaphor vehicle of an “illusion,” supplemented by “magical creation” (*nirmāṇa*). Again, the topic is “living beings.” The metaphor in this verse is more syntactically complete:

[Agent] Magician (*māyākarō*)

[verb<sub>1</sub>] conjures up [subject<sub>1</sub>] a crowd of people [location] at the crossroads;

[verb<sub>2</sub>] cuts off [subject<sub>2</sub>] many thousands of heads;

[verb<sub>3</sub>] knows [subject<sub>3</sub>] world as magical creation;

[verb<sub>4</sub>] remains fearless (in the face of decapitation).<sup>124</sup>

Reflecting on verses *Rgs* 1:16-17, the implied sense is:

[Agent] Bodhisattva (*māyākarō*)

[verb<sub>1</sub>] constructs [subject<sub>1</sub>] the notion of living beings [location] at some public location;

[verb<sub>2</sub>] cuts off [subject<sub>2</sub>] attachment and the view of a living being;

[verb<sub>3</sub>] knows [subject<sub>3</sub>] world of living beings as a conceptualization;

[verb<sub>4</sub>] remains fearless (in the face of loss of identity).

This lends strength to reading the “illusion” metaphor as a kind of cognition or conceptual notion. This is fully in conformity with the trends that we saw in the mainstream period, where the illusion metaphor became predominant. But it is not an across the board cognitive error, it is specifically with respect to the notion of a self or living being. This is still in conformity with the early period use of the term—coreless, devoid, and empty of a self.

Finally, we reach our supposedly “shocking” and “novel” statement which considers the realizations and fruitions of the various holy sages to be “all born of illusion” (§o). Referring to *nirvāṇa*, we immediately become aware of the distinction that began to become increasingly more pronounced during the mainstream period between conditioned and unconditioned phenomena, as *nirvāṇa* classically falls into the latter category.

Verse *Rgs* 2:5 itself provides little in terms of metaphorical structure, but earlier verses in this chapter paint a broader picture. *Rgs* 2:1 refers to



“not standing” (*na sthigate*) in the five aggregates; a theme which continues through *Rgs* 2:2 with reference to “he takes not his stand on the fruit which he won.”<sup>125</sup> Then in *Rgs* 2:3 we see the Tathāgata described as neither stationed in the conditioned or unconditioned, rather the Bodhisattva stands without standing.<sup>126</sup> To fully tie the content of these last verses, the subsequent verse *Rgs* 2:6 also makes reference to the same absence of fear or alarm (*na trasanti*) that we saw above in *Rgs* 1:19, suggesting basic overall parallels.

This list, from the aggregates through to the unconditioned realizations and fruitions, appears to be another exhaustive contrast set of “all things,” and all of the topic field is referred to by the single vehicle metaphor as “illusion.” Drawing in the uses of the term in chapter 1, the double sense of both absence of attachment and absence of self, seem still applicable here. The notion that the realizations and fruitions of the holy path are devoid or empty of a self has been a constant through all three historical phases examined here, the early, mainstream, and now early Mahāyāna. Even for the mainstream period, an unconditioned *dharma* called *nirvāṇa* (or more strictly speaking, *nirodha*), was still selfless. The use of the metaphor for nonattachment is novel here, implied in the overall metaphorical structure at the center of chapter 1. But, the notion of absence of attachment, even to holy fruition, is definitely not novel.

## THE NOT SO SHOCKING BIRTH AND DEATH OF A BUDDHIST COGNITIVE METAPHOR

We began this essay with a discussion on how the metaphor of “like an illusion” (*māyopama*) in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, particularly when descriptive of *nirvāṇa*, has been portrayed in modern Buddhist studies scholarship as shocking and novel (§0). In order to uncover the entire picture, we have explored the broader use of the “illusion” (*māyā*) metaphor through three broad historical-textual phases, namely pre- and early Buddhism (§0), the mainstream Buddhist period (§0), and only then our early *Prajñāpāramitā* material (§0). Rather than merely citing and discussing textual passages in terms of the usual text-historical development of an idea, we analyzed the metaphor’s usage during each of these three phases through Kittay’s perspectival approach. In particular, the examination of the semantic fields of both the topic to be elucidated and the metaphorical vehicle that elucidates it, as well as showing the underlying semantic expressions underlying the cognitive process of transference of meaning (§0). We are now in position to answer our initial query of which the illusion metaphor was indeed a new and radical *Prajñāpāramitā* creation, in terms of both historical process and the application and range of the metaphor itself. Through this

analysis, we have also uncovered what we would like to call the “birth” and “death” of the illusion metaphor—itself a metaphor for growth and change through time—which we see follows a process that other scholars of metaphors have previously discussed in much detail (refer §o).

### The Birth (and Adoption) of the Illusion Metaphor

As we have shown, the birth of the illusion metaphor in India begins with the *Vedas*, and continues into the early *Upaniṣads*. Indra creates this world of illusion just as the Vedic ritualist creates results through *mantra* and sacrifice (§o). It is highly likely that the Buddhists or even the Buddha himself appropriated this metaphor for their own purposes, but subverted it in a similar fashion to their appropriation of other Brahmanic cognitive models (such as *agni*—“fire”) (§o, §o). We consider this a subversion for the obvious reason that the early Buddhist use of “illusion” was not at all applied to refer to the world as a whole in the sense of a creation, as in the Vedic usage. Quite to the contrary, where the Brahmanic Self (*ātman*) functioned as the intermediary between the macrocosm and the microcosm, the Buddhists used “illusion” as one of a number of hyponyms for “devoid (*ritta*), hollow (*tucchaka*), and coreless (*asāraka*)”—the absence of a Self (*anātman*) (§o).

As no such specific term for the “absence of Self” was in existence, we may surmise that the sheer novelty and radical nature of the Buddha’s denial and rejection of such a core Indian religious notion of Self—by this, or any other synonymous term—was initially an act of catachresis. As Ricœur states, “The borrowed term, taken in its figurative sense, is substituted for an absent word....When the substitution corresponds to a real gap in vocabulary, when it is forced, one speaks of catachresis.”<sup>127</sup> This is how it may have been perceived by the Vedic Brahmins—an abuse of language; but to the Buddhists, it became the birth (or perhaps an adoption) of an appropriate metaphor.

The various historical conditions that secured the Buddhist tradition out of all the various newly formed *śramaṇa* traditions thus also secured the safe growth and maturation of this newborn (or newly adopted) metaphor as an integral part of the Buddhist linguistic family. Originally the last of five metaphorical children in the *Phenapiṇḍa*, as Buddhism matured to become mainstream, “illusion” began to gradually take more of the center stage, while her siblings faded into the wings (§o).

A critical element for mainstream Buddhism’s survival in the broader Indian religious context was defending its position of “not self” in the face of the other non-Buddhist systems that posited such an entity. While the *ātmavāda* traditions could resolve issues of causality, bondage, and liberation to the status of the eternal Self, the Buddhists moved responsibility

onto a continuous yet ever-changing mind (*citta*). As a synonym or near synonym for cognition (*viññāna*), an implied sense of Buddhist causality (dependent origination) as an illusion began to arise. In a sense, this may have paralleled the Vedic notion of Indra's creation as an illusionist and his illusion, though we do not see an explicitly paralleled semantic structural field in the Buddhist literature of the time. Similarly, while Indra the illusionist himself is not an illusion, for the Buddhists, the four truths—in particular the unconditioned truth of cessation (or *nirvāṇa*)—were not such a cognitive deception (§o, §o).

### Is “Like an Illusion” a *Prajñāpāramitā* Creation?

In addition to these analytical lineages within the mainstream fold, hagiographies of the Buddha's life were also incredibly popular. Most likely taught by specialist oral tradition story tellers, their masterful use of metaphor and other figures of speech ensured that later generations were heirs to a rich inheritance of such literature. They in turn became the forefathers of the Mahāyāna, where the life of Gautama became not a metaphor but a comprehensive model for all Buddhas.

By the time of the early Mahāyāna, perhaps as typified in the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* and *Ratnaguṇasaṃcaya Gāthā*, the illusion metaphor had already come of age, reaching the height of her popularity. While the *Prajñāpāramitā* has gained a reputation in modern Buddhist studies as a “philosophical” rather than “religious” text, more concerned with emptiness and suchness than religious myth, we still see repeated and pervasive use of metaphor at the core of these teachings.

A dominant metaphor found in the opening chapters of the text itself defines the very central character—the *bodhisattva*—as a “great warrior hero” (*mahāsattva*) who binds on his “armor” (*saṃnaha*) of compassion, mounts and sets forth on his great chariot (*mahāyāna*) of the Buddha's teachings, to behead the enemy of the “view of a Self” (*ātma-drṣṭi*). The illusion metaphor partially maps onto this, wherein the *bodhisattva* is an “illusionist” (*māyākāra*) who conjures up the “illusory appearance” (*māyā*) of countless living beings, only to decapitate the view of a sentient being (*sattva-drṣṭi*), and remain fearless in the face of loss of identity (§o). Later, the illusion metaphor appears again, to reaffirm that while even the conditioned five aggregate constituents of the living being are illusory (§o), so too are the unconditioned results of such insight, whether that of an *arhat*, a *pratyekabuddha*, or a fully awakened Buddha (§o).

There have been claims by some early modern scholars on the *Prajñāpāramitā*, that the text's use of the “illusion” is a “shocking” “novelty.” Conze is perhaps one of the first to establish this claim,<sup>128</sup> though

we also find it in others such as Yinshun<sup>129</sup> and Williams.<sup>130</sup> It is important to place their positions within the broader context of the overall academic narrative of emptiness, which also claims a radical point of departure for Mahāyāna Buddhism as a whole. Part of the problem of such claims is the overreliance on post hoc commentarial literature that exists in a later doctrinal and linguistic community (§o). Contrary to this, our analysis here through Kittay's perspectival and cognitive approach to metaphors clearly demonstrates these claims to shocking novelty to not be the case at all. If anything, the *Prajñāpāramitā* usage of the metaphor combines features found in both its infancy and youth. The sense that all phenomena are not self, through any one of a number of exhaustive taxonomies, found throughout the early and middle stages of its life, was clearly preserved. The analysis of phenomena into the conditioned and the unconditioned that waxed during its youth was also brought in, though the *Prajñāpāramitā* resisted the temptation to apply the metaphor of not self partially—it was still applied to all. Moreover, the cognitive sense that became predominant during the mainstream period was preserved, into that the metaphor came to target not so much the objective or ontological argument that phenomena are not self, but the mind that erroneously perceives them as such. So, too, the strong connection of this metaphor with Buddhist causality, through the equation of the “Buddha’s body” and “Buddha’s voice”—the Dharma (§o).

### The Death of the Illusion Metaphor

While our initial challenge of whether or not the “illusion” metaphor was a *Prajñāpāramitā* creation has now been resolved, we would like to mention a few words not on its birth and creation, but on its subsequent death. While we have not detailed the later developments of the “illusion” metaphor in the Buddhist tradition, we may cite the findings of previous scholars who have. Nakamura’s study of the broader *Vedānta* tradition’s “illusion theory” (*māyāvāda*) describes that the doctrine “later was influenced by the Mādhyamika school of Buddhism, and rapidly developed; and finally under that influence, the doctrine of *Māyā* (Illusion) was formed.”<sup>131</sup> By the medieval period, “*Māyāvāda* may be said to be the idea that only the Brahman is real, and that everything else is completely phantasmagoric or false,” with a number of Vedāntic scholars criticizing the theory as “crypto-Buddhist.”<sup>132</sup> The perceived source(s) could have been referring more specifically to either Mahāyāna Mādhyamika or Vijñānavāda teachings, as both have been so criticized. As we stated earlier, the Vedic model required an “agent.” Obviously, the Buddhists could not accept a creator such as the Brahmanic Īśvara, so what would they posit if it were to conform to the model? Perhaps the role of the mind, especially in the sense of the *ālāyavijñāna*, as a creator of all phenomena, which could

easily slide into the notion of *vijñaptimātratā*. One of the key points here, is that at this point the theory is not “like an illusion” (*māyopama*), but “is illusion” (*māyā*). It is no longer borrowing the metaphorical vehicle of an illusionist and his illusory creation, juxtaposing two similar models to elucidate the notion of appearance without selfhood, but saying that the phenomenon is itself an illusion, a phantasm (refer Bodhi’s comments in §o). How has this occurred?

The “death” of metaphors is well known to those who study them. Ricœur, paraphrasing Fontanier, states how the metaphor “‘appears in a more and more fixed and standardized fashion’, and, in this sense, can be said ‘to be part of the foundation of language’—that is, it begins to act like a literal meaning.”<sup>133</sup> Several quite disparate positions on the relationship between metaphoric and literal expression have been taken, argued, and defended by scholars. While Davidson’s notion that metaphors only have literal meaning may be extreme among the positions, he does make an excellent point in terms of dead metaphors.<sup>134</sup> This is because the original semantic field of the vehicle metaphor can extend over time to fully include the topic field, and are thus no longer metaphorical. We must thus keep in mind that not only do the doctrinal positions of Buddhist and other systems change, but so too the metaphors and other figurative models that are used to signify them. In discussing the notion of scientific models as metaphoric models, and how Kuhnian changes of scientific paradigm may be also considered through the underlying metaphors behind such models, Kittay insightfully asks:

The interests of linguistic philosophers and philosophers of science converge again on the question of change of meaning. When one theory replaces another in a paradigm-shift, do the terms of the second theory which are carried over from the first theory change in meaning?<sup>135</sup>

This is in effect our situation here in the use of “illusion” (*māyā*) as a religious philosophical metaphor becoming a doctrinal model in its own right. Further systematic and detailed studies of other key Buddhist cognitive metaphors—for example, “work” (*karma*), “seeds” (*bīja*), and “fruit” (*phala*)—are also ripe for further research, and may provide hitherto unidentified insights into Buddhist thought.

## NOTES

1. Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines; Verse Summary; Large Sūtra; Diamond; Heart*.
2. Conze, *Buddhist Studies*, 48–86.
3. Ibid., 73.

4.	We have discussed some of the assumptions and problems of this narrative elsewhere (Orsborn = Shi Huifeng, <i>Chiasmus</i> , 103ff), and would like to set it aside from the current essay.	1 2 3
5.	Conze, <i>Buddhist Studies</i> , 168.	4
6.	Ibid., 124.	5
7.	Ibid., 124ff.	6
8.	Hikata, <i>Suvikrāntavikrāmi</i> ; Vaidya, <i>Aṣṭasāhasrikā</i> ; Kajiyoshi, <i>Original Prajñā</i> ; Schmithausen, “Textgeschichtliche Beobachtungen”; Yinshun, <i>Origins and Development</i> . For a discussion, refer Orsborn = Shi Huifeng, <i>Chiasmus</i> , 87ff.	7 8 9 10
9.	Conze, <i>Buddhist Studies</i> , 126–27.	11
10.	Ibid., 177f.	12
11.	Yinshun, <i>Investigation</i> , 170f, 198f.	13
12.	Ibid., 194ff; 261ff.	14
13.	Williams, <i>Mahāyāna Buddhism</i> , 46.	15
14.	Refer Conze, <i>Eight Thousand Lines</i> , 99.	16
15.	Williams, <i>Mahāyāna Buddhism</i> , 46.	17
16.	Ibid., 62, 67.	18
17.	Streng, “Śūnyam and Śūnyatā,” 155f.	19
18.	MacQueen, “Inspired Speech.”	20
19.	Schuster, “Changing the Female Body.”	21
20.	Harrison, “Origins of the Mahāyāna,” 49.	22
21.	Gombrich, “Obsession with Origins,” 5.	23
22.	Conze, <i>Buddhist Studies</i> , 166f.	24
23.	Discussion in Shi Huifeng, <i>Chiasmus</i> .	25
24.	Kittay, <i>Metaphor</i> .	26
25.	Richards, <i>Philosophy of Metaphor</i> ; Black, <i>Models and Metaphors</i> .	27
26.	Kittay, <i>Metaphor</i> , 13ff.	28
27.	Ibid., 25f.	29
28.	Long, “Dead or Alive?”; Moore, <i>Symbol and Myth</i> .	30
29.	Kittay, <i>Metaphor</i> , ch. 5 and ch. 6, respectively.	31
30.	Ibid., 214ff.	32
31.	Ibid., 22ff.	33
32.	Ibid., 223ff.	34
33.	Ibid., 227ff.	35
34.	Ibid., 230ff.	36
35.	Ibid., 239ff.	37
36.	Ibid., 296; Ricœur, <i>Rule of Metaphor</i> , 71f.	38
37.	Ricœur, <i>Rule of Metaphor</i> , 72.	39
38.	Ibid., 342.	40
39.	Lakoff and Johnson, <i>Metaphors We Live By</i> .	41
40.	Nakamura, <i>Early Vedānta</i> , 272.	42



41. Griffith, *Hymns*, 6:47; Sanskrit in Aufrecht, *Rig Veda*: “RV\_6,047.18a rūpaṃrūpaṃ pratrūpo babhūva tad asya rūpaṃ praticakṣaṇāya| RV\_6,047.18c indro māyābhiḥ pururūpa iyate yuktā hy asya harayaḥ śatā daśa||.”
42. Ibid., 10:54; Sanskrit in Aufrecht, *Rig Veda*: “RV\_10,054.02a yad acaras tanvā vāvṛdhāno balānindra prabruvāṇo janeṣu| RV\_10,054.02c māyet sā te yāni yuddhāny āhur nāḍya śatruṃ nanu purā vivitse||.”
43. Ibid., 10:71; Sanskrit in Aufrecht, *Rig Veda*: “RV\_10,071.05a uta tvaṃ sakhye sthirapītaṃ āhur nainaṃ hinvanty api vājineṣu| RV\_10,071.05c adhenvā carati māyayaīṣa vācaṃ śuśruvām aphalām apuṣpām||.”
44. Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, 252.
45. Ibid., 260; Sanskrit in Sanskrit Documents, *Svetasvatara-Upaniṣad*: “chandāṃsi yajñāḥ kratavo vratāni| bhūtaṃ bhavyaṃ yac ca vedā vadanti| asmān māyī sṛjate viśvam etat| tasmimś cānyo māyayā saṃniruddhaḥ||SvetUp\_4.9||”; “māyāṃ tu prakṛtiṃ vidyān| māyinaṃ tu maheśvaraṃ| tasyāvayavabhūtais tu| vyāptaṃ sarvaṃ idaṃ jagat||SvetUp\_4.10||.”
46. Ibid., 391.
47. Nakamura, *Early Vedānta*, 272.
48. SN 22:95; SN iii 142: “Seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, māyākāro vā māyākārantevāsi vā catumahāpathe māyaṃ vidamseyya. Tameṇaṃ cakkhumā puriso passeyya nijjhāyeyya yoniso upaparikkheyya. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyeyya, tucchakaññeva khāyeyya, asārakaññeva khāyeyya. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, māyāya sāro? Evameva kho, bhikkhave, yaṃ kiñci viññāṇaṃ atītānāgatapaccuppannaṃ...pe...yaṃ dūre santike vā, taṃ bhikkhu passati nijjhāyati yoniso upaparikkhati. Tassa taṃ passato nijjhāyato yoniso upaparikkhato rittakaññeva khāyati, tucchakaññeva khāyati, asārakaññeva khāyati. Kiñhi siyā, bhikkhave, viññāṇe sāro?” Translation adapted from Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, 952.
49. Ibid.: “Etādisāyaṃ santāno, māyāyaṃ bālalāpini; Vadhako esa akkhāto, sāro ettha na vijjati.” Translation adapted from Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, 953.
50. SĀ 265, \*Phenapiṇḍa (Jūmò 聚沫) 《雜阿含經》卷10: 「...諦觀分別時。無所有。無牢。無實。無有堅固。所以者何。彼聚沫中無堅實故。...」 (CBETA, T02, no. 99, p. 68, b29-p. 69, b3), etc. We have translated the three terms from the vehicle field closer to the Chinese than simply the Indic sources alone, to further extend the sense in which the translators appeared to have understood the passage.
51. *Suttanipāta* 4:12 172 v883: “Yamāhu saccaṃ tathiyanti eke, tamāhu aññe tucchaṃ musāti”; English translation in Norman, *Rhinoceros Horn*, 146.
52. DN 13, *Tevijja*, DN i 240: “Tesamidaṃ tevijjānaṃ brāhmaṇānaṃ bhāsitaṃ hassakaññeva sampajjati, nāmakaññeva sampajjati, rittakaññeva sampajjati, tucchakaññeva sampajjati.” English from Walshe, *Long Discourses*, 189.
53. MN 49, *Brahmanimantanika*, MN i 329: ““Sace kho, mārisa, sabbassa sabbatena ananubhūtaṃ, tadabhiññāya mā heva te rittakam eva ahosi, tucchakam eva ahosi”ti.” English from Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, *Middle Length Discourses*, 428.





54. MN 106, *Āneñjasappāya*, MN ii 261: “*aniccā, bhikkhave, kāmā tucchā musā mosadhammā. Māyākatame taṃ, bhikkhave, bālalāpanaṃ.*” English from *Ñānamoli and Bodhi, Middle Length Discourses*, 869. 1  
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55. *Suttanipāta* 2:9, PTS Sn 57: “*Hassaṃ jappaṃ paridevaṃ padosaṃ, māyākatam kuhanaṃ giddhi mānaṃ; Sārambhaṃ kakkasaṃ kasāvañca mucchaṃ, hitvā care vītamaḍo t̥hitatto.*” English from Norman, *Rhinoceros Horn*, 40. 4  
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56. We use parentheses “(…)” for implied or anaphoric reference(s) stated explicitly earlier in the verse(s) (see Kittay, *Metaphor*, 303ff). 7  
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57. Gombrich, *Buddha Thought*; drawing on Jurewicz, “Playing with Fire.” 9
58. Refer to Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 11, 92. 10
59. Yinshun, *Investigation*, 86ff. 11
60. EĀ 35:9 \**Phenapiṇḍa* (Jù mò 聚沫) 《增壹阿含經》卷27〈35 邪聚品〉「…盡觀諸行 皆悉空寂…世尊告曰。善哉。多耆耆。善能觀察此五盛陰本。汝今當知。夫為行人當觀察此五陰之本。皆不牢固。所以然者。[20]當觀此五盛陰時。在道樹下[21]成無上等正覺。亦如卿今日所觀。」(CBETA, T02, no. 125, p. 701, b23-c12) [20]當觀=我當觀察【宋】【元】【明】。[21]（成）—【宋】【元】【明】。The first half of this EĀ *sūtra* is the same as SN 8:4, but the portion dealing with “illusion” cited here is absent in the Pāli. 12  
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61. EĀ 26:7 《增壹阿含經》卷18〈26 四意斷品〉「…一切變易之法。欲令不變易者。終不有此事。大王當知。人身之法猶如雪[23]揣。要當歸壞。亦如土坏。同亦歸壞不可久保。亦如野馬幻化。虛偽不真。亦如空[24]拳。以誑小兒。」(CBETA, T02, no. 125, p. 638, c2-7) [23]揣=搏【宋】【元】【明】。[24]拳=捲【聖】; paralleled by SN 3:22 *Ayyakā*, SN i 216f; however, this passage is absent in the Pāli, though there is the simile of the “potter’s vessels.” The term “野馬,” literally “wild horse,” but likely from “\**mṛgaṭṛṣṇa*,” is described in the *Mahāprajñā-pāramitā Upadeśa* 《大智度論》卷6: (CBETA, T25, no. 1509, p. 102, b2-3). See also Lamotte, *Treatise*, Vol I 298, and Yinshun, *Investigation*, 90, for discussions of these similes. 19  
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62. SĀ 186 《雜阿含經》卷7: 「如沫。如泡。如芭蕉。如幻。」(CBETA, T02, no. 99, p. 48, b29). 28  
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63. Vaidya, *Lalitavisatara*, 26, 122, 125: “*sarvam anitya kāmā adhruvaṃ na ca śāśvatā api na kalpāḥ* | *māyāmaricisadrśā vidyutphenopamā capalāḥ* || Lal<sub>4.5</sub> ||”; “*saṃskāra nirīha śūnyakāḥ kadaliskandhasamā nirīkṣataḥ* | *māyopama cittamohanā bālaullāpana ukta muṣṭivat* || Lal<sub>13.98</sub> ||”. English adapted from Conze, *Buddhist Texts*, 158. 30  
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64. *Ibid.*, 154, 273: “*vijñānanirodhasaṃbhavaṃ vijñānotpādayayaṃ vipaśyati* | *akāḥiṃ ca gataṃ anāgataṃ śūnya māyopama yogi paśyati* || Lal<sub>13.107</sub> ||”. English adapted from Conze, *Buddhist Texts*, 158. 34  
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65. Bodhi, *Connected Discourses*, 1085f, n. 188. 37
66. *Ibid.*, 1087, n. 194. 38
67. \**Vasumitrabodhisattvasaṃgraha Śāstra* 《尊婆須蜜菩薩所集論》卷6: 「又世尊言: 「識法如幻; 最勝故說。」說是語時其義云何。答曰。…「識法如幻」者: 彼如幻師, 無眾生謂有眾生想。吾我識如是。故曰「識如幻法; 最勝為釋種。故曰最勝說。」(CBETA, T28, no. 1549, p. 767, c22-p. 768, a15). 39  
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68. According to the PED, s.v.: “*muṭṭhi* an empty fist (*°sadisa*: comparing someone as regards ignorance) SnA 306 = DhA iv 38 *°hattha* (adj.) empty-handed J v 46; Sdhp 309”; and *ibid.* “J i 209 (*°hattha*, empty-handed).”
69. SĀ 591 《雜阿含經》卷22:「此欲者。虛妄不實。欺誑之法。猶如幻化。誑於嬰兒。」(CBETA, To2, no. 99, p. 157, a29–30). There is no Pāli equivalent of this text.
70. *Satyasiddhi Śāstra* 《成實論》卷9 (127 無明品) 「又現見貪著此不淨身。亦於無常中生常想。猶[13]若空[14]捲以誑小兒。亦如幻師能現前誑人。令見土為金。」(CBETA, T32, no. 1646, p. 313, c8–11) [13]若=如【宋】【元】【明】【宮】。[14]捲=拳【宋】【元】【明】【宮】。
71. *Prakaraṇapāda Śāstra* 《阿毘達磨集異門足論》卷18 (9 八法品) (CBETA, T26, no. 1536, p. 442, b22–c5).
72. *Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra* 《阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論》卷16 (CBETA, T27, no. 1545, p. 78, b29–c13).
73. *Mahāvibhāṣa Śāstra* 《阿毘達磨大毘婆沙論》卷69 (CBETA, T27, no. 1545, p. 357, c1–10): “therefore, what you have stated is empty and without substantial meaning”; and regards “all phenomena” (*sarvadharma*) *ibid.* 卷197: (CBETA, T27, no. 1545, p. 986, a3–8; p. 986, c4–p. 987, a18): “asking about other phenomena apart from this all phenomena is a baseless, empty argument”; and “apart from this [all phenomena] there are no further phenomena which can be subsumed, therefore it is known as a ‘baseless, empty argument.’”
74. SĀ 273 *\*Hastatāḍopama Sūtra* 《雜阿含經》卷11:「比丘。諸行如幻。如炎。剎那時頃盡朽。不實來實去。」(CBETA, To2, no. 99, p. 72, c12–13).
75. *Abhidharma Nyānānusāra Śāstra* 《阿毘達磨順正理論》卷14:「如[5]撫掌喻。契經中言。苾芻諸行如幻如焰。暫時而住。速還謝滅。」(CBETA, T29, no. 1562, p. 411, c23–24) [5]撫=拊【宋】【元】【明】【宮】. This is the commentary on the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 《阿毘達磨俱舍論》卷5:「生能生所生 非離因緣合」(CBETA, T29, no. 1558, p. 28, c6); Sanskrit: “*yasmāt janyasya janikā jātir na hetupratyayair vinā*||46||.” According to the English translation, de la Vallée Poussin, trs. Pruden, *Abhidharmakośa*, Vol I, 247f, verse 46cd: “Arising engenders the *dharma* that it should engender, but not without the cooperation of causes and conditions.”
76. Yinshun, *Investigation*, 88 n4.
77. *Yogācāra–bhūmi Śāstra* 《瑜伽師地論》卷91:「又此諸行以於諸趣種種自體生起差別。不成實故。說如幻事。想心見倒迷亂性故。...」(CBETA, T30, no. 1579, p. 820, c21–27). See also Yinshun, *Investigation*, 88 n4.
78. See Skilling, *Mahāsūtras*, Vol. I, Vol. II.
79. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 23of.
80. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 227ff; 251.
81. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 31ff, 63–88.
82. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 243–49; 260.
83. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 243ff.
84. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 246f.





85. Ibid., Vol. II, 245. 1
86. See also Yinshun, *Investigation*, 88ff. 2
87. *Satyasiddhi Śāstra* 《成實論》卷2〈19 有相品〉「又《幻網經》說：有幻幻事者無眾生中見似眾生。故名為幻。」(CBETA, T32, no. 1646, p. 254, b1-3). For affiliation of this text, see Yinshun, *Investigation*, 132. 3  
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88. *Abhidharma Nyānānusāra Śāstra* 《阿毘達磨順正理論》卷50：「見幻事者。雖所執無非無幻相。若不許爾幻相應無。幻相是何謂幻術果。如神通者所化作色。如是幻相有實顯形。從幻術生能為見[5]境。所執實事是畢竟無。故彼經中說為非有。由諸幻事有相無實。能惑亂他名能亂眼。」(CBETA, T29, no. 1562, p. 623, b29-c4) [5]境＝體【宋】【元】【明】【宮】。 6  
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89. *Abhidharma Nyānānusāra Śāstra* 《阿毘達磨順正理論》卷50：「見幻事者。雖所執無非無幻相。若不許爾幻相應無。幻相是何謂幻術果。如神通者所化作色。如是幻相有實顯形。從幻術生能為見[5]境。所執實事是畢竟無。故彼經中說為非有。由諸幻事有相無實。能惑亂他名能亂眼。」(CBETA, T29, no. 1562, p. 623, b29-c4) [5]境＝體【宋】【元】【明】【宮】。 11  
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90. *Abhidharma Nyānānusāra Śāstra* 《阿毘達磨順正理論》卷4：「謬引聖言。佛告多聞諸聖弟子。汝等今者應如是學。諸有過去未來現在。眼所識色。此中都無常性恒性。廣說乃至。無顛倒性。出世聖諦。皆是虛偽妄失之法。」(CBETA, T29, no. 1562, p. 350, c8-11). 16  
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91. *Abhidharma Nyānānusāra Śāstra* 《阿毘達磨順正理論》卷4：「又彼師徒[5]串習世典。引眾盲喻。」(CBETA, T29, no. 1562, p. 350, c14) [5]串＝慣【宋】【元】【明】【宮】。 20  
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92. *\*Vijñaptimātrasiddhiritratnājāta Śāstra* 《成唯識實生論》卷4：「無有常定。無妄無異實事可得。或如所有。或無倒性。悉皆非有。唯除聖者。出過世間斯成真實。」(CBETA, T31, no. 1591, p. 91, c7-9). 22  
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93. The *Śālistamba* is often claimed to be a Mahāyāna sūtra. While the titles of the earliest recensions in Chinese are simply “*Śālistamba*,” the later Sanskrit recension title is prefixed with “*Madhyamaka*—”. However, as Reat clearly shows, content and structure “much of which is found scattered through the Pāli suttas,” all suggest “as the date of the *Śālistamba Sūtra* as a whole, 200 B.C.E. plus or minus 100 years” (Reat, *Śālistamba*, 4-5). It thus actually predates the already self-identifying form of the Mahāyāna, but was later widely cited by Mahāyāna scholars, and formed an important basis for their presentation of dependent origination. Note that unlike the previous two sectarian sūtras, however, it is not associated with the SĀ or the Sarvāstivāda in general. The sūtra famously states that: “Whoever sees dependent origination sees the Dharma. Who sees the Dharma, sees the Buddha.” This is most likely a combination of two statements concerning “seeing the dharma” found elsewhere in the Āgamas. 25  
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94. Vaidya, *Śālistamba*, 105: “*asvāmikeṣu dharmeṣu amameṣu aparigraheṣu ākāśasameṣu māyālakṣaṇasvabhāveṣu hetupratyayānām avaikalyāt | tadāyathā-pañcabhiḥ kāraṇaiḥ cakṣurvijñānam utpadyate*.” Varies slight with Chinese *Śālistamba Sūtra* 《佛說大乘稻芊經》卷1：「如是無我之法。無我我所。猶如虛空。依彼幻法。」(CBETA, T16, no. 712, p. 825, c19-20); and other translations. 38  
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95. Vaidya, *Śālistamba*, 106: “...asataḥ tucchataḥ riktataḥ asārataḥ...”. Also Chinese *Śālistamba Sūtra* 《佛說大乘稻芊經》卷1: 「...虛. 誑. 無堅實...」 (CBETA, T16, no. 712, p. 826, a6–11); and other translations.
96. Reat, *Śālistamba*, 13.
97. Jones, *Mahāvastu* Vol. I, 58; For the Sanskrit *Mahāvastu Avadāna*; Senart, *Mahāvastu Avadāna*, 1.73: “...tena skandhā taḍibudbudopamā...phenapiṇḍakam iva prabhāsvaraṃ|....”
98. Jones, *Mahāvastu* Vol. II, 140f; For the Sanskrit *Mahāvastu Avadāna*; Senart, *Mahāvastu Avadāna*, 2.145f: “...asti tāta dhanakṣayaṃ paśyāmi sarvadharmāṃ riktakam tucchakam asārakam māyopamaṃ....”
99. Conze, *Buddhist Studies*, 124ff.
100. Hikata, *Suvikrāntavikrāmi*; Schmithausen, “Textgeschichtliche Beobachtungen”; Yinshun, *Origins and Development*.
101. Elsewhere, we have given extensive analysis on the underlying structures behind these passages within the first two chapters of the text, concluding that it forms an inverted parallel form known as a “chiasmus” or “ring construction” (in Orsborn = Shi Huifeng, *Chiasmus*). While considering the following passages on “illusion” in the light of these structures will promote a deeper perspective, the passages alone should be sufficient for our argument here.
102. Yuyama, *Recension A*, 11, vi:13: “yo ’sau na vidyati sa eṣa a-vidya-nāmā taṃ bālu kalpayi a-vidya karāti vidyāṃ| vidyā-a-vidya ubhi eti a-santa dharma niryāti yo imi prajānati bodhisattvo||.” English translation in Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 10.
103. Ibid.: “māyopamān ya iha jānati pañca skandhān na ca māya anyā na ca skandha karoti anyān| nānātva-saṃjñā-vigato upaśānta-cāri eṣā sa prajñā-varapāramitāya caryā||.” English translation in Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 10.
104. *Daoxing* (To8, no. 224, p. 427, a17–26); *Damingdu(A)* (To8, no. 225, p. 480, b10–19); *Chāojīng* (To8, no. 226, p. 510, a7–17); *Xiāopīn* (To8, no. 227, p. 538, b25–c4); Sanskrit, Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, 8–9; English in Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 88.
105. *Daoxing* (To8, no. 224, p. 427, c28–p. 428, a6); *Damingdu(A)* (To8, no. 225, p. 481, a11–18); *Chāojīng* (To8, no. 226, p. 510, c16–23); *Xiaopin* (To8, no. 227, p. 539, a18–20); Sanskrit, Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, 12; English from Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 11, 91.
106. Yuyama, *Recension A*, 13, v 1:19: “māyā-karo yatha catuṣ-pathi nirmitvā mahato janasya bahu chindati śīrṣa-koṭi| yatha te ’hatāyu tatha jānati bodhisattvo nirmāṇu sarva jagato na ca tasya trāso||.” English from Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 11.
107. Ibid., 13, v 1:16: “...sarvatra saṅga-kṣaya icchatī saṅga-chedi...||.” English in Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 11.
108. Ibid., 13, v 1:17: “...dṛṣṭi-gatān mahati chindati sattva-dhāto...||.” English in Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 11.
109. Yuyama, “First Two Chapters,” 208.





110. *Daoxing* (To8, no. 224, p. 430, a1-14); *Damingdu(A)* (To8, no. 225, p. 483, a1-10); *Chaojing* (To8, no. 226, p. 512, b26-c10); *Xiaopin* (To8, no. 227, p. 540, c5-18); Sanskrit, Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, 20; English in Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 98-99. 1  
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111. Yuyama, *Recension A*, 18, v 2:5: “*māyā-ja dharmata ya śroṣyati bhāṣyamāṇām phala-prāpta pratyaya-jino tatha loka-nātho| nirvāṇu yo adhigato vidu-panḍitehi sarve ta māya-ja nidiṣṭu tathāgatena||*.” English from Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 13. 5  
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112. Compare with Yuyama, *Recension A*, 18; 1977: 208f. 9
113. Yuyama, “First Two Chapters,” 213. 10
114. This also appears at Rgs 1:23 and equivalent prose, the nonduality of non-arising and non-cessation of the aggregates. *Xiaopin* (To8, no. 227, p. 539, b24-27); Sanskrit, Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, 13; English in Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 92. Compare also with Karashima, *Critical Edition*, 47n378ff. 11  
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115. Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, xvi. 15
116. Again, we have given extensive analysis on the underlying structures behind these passages within the *Avadāna* showing them to be chiasmic inverted parallel forms (in Orsborn = Shi Huifeng, *Chiasmus*). This structural analysis helps highlight the importance of these particular passages, though it not essential for our argument here. 16  
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117. *Daoxing* 《道行般若經》卷9〈28 薩陀波倫菩薩品〉：「[曇無竭菩薩報言：『空本無所從來，去亦無所至，佛亦如是。...』] (CBETA, To8, no. 224, p. 473, c9-24); English in Lancaster, *Analysis*, 266. Cf. *Dāmīngdù(B)* 《大明度經》卷6〈28 普慈闍土品〉 (CBETA, To8, no. 225, p. 505, b26-c1). 21  
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118. See Lancaster, *Analysis*, 389, which has “*anutpattikeṣu dharmeṣu kṣāntir*” for “無所從生法樂” in *Daoxing* and *Damingdu(B)*. 25  
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119. See elsewhere in the *Dàoxíng* 《道行般若經》卷5〈13 分別品〉：「[無所適著] (CBETA, To8, no. 224, p. 453, a1) (≈ S14:2), where “無所適著” corresponds to “*anabhinirviṣya*” (refer Karashima, *Glossary*, 447); and also *The Pratyutpanna Samādhī Sūtra*, where “無所適著” → “no...attachments” (in Harrison, *Pratyutpanna*, 88). 27  
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120. The text reads 經界 (ignore 經果 of the Taishō, as per to Karashima, *Critical Edition*, 504 n610), which is probably scribal omission error for 經法界. 經法 is the standard translation for *dharma* in the text, thus we back translate 經法界 as *\*dharma-dhātu*, considering that the character 法 has been omitted here (Karashima, *Glossary*, 269). 32  
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121. See Lancaster, *Analysis*, 293-303. 37
122. *Daoxing* 《道行般若經》卷10〈29 曇無竭菩薩品〉 (CBETA, To8, no. 224, p. 476, b2-p. 477, a27). 38  
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123. For the *Prajñāpāramitā*, at Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 291; and Vaidya, *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, 253. They are thus very similar to the verse in the *Vajracchedikā* on seeing the Buddha through his physical body or hearing his voice, 40  
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- contrasted with realization of the “*Dharma* body” as an extrasensory object of gnosis. For the *Vajracchedikā*, see Sanskrit in Vaidya, *Vajracchedikā*; see also the verse in the \**Vimaladattāparipṛcchā Sūtra* (T12, no. 339, p. 101, c1–2), which is identical with that in the *Vajracchedikā*.
124. Again, the continuity of the subject for the subsequent verbs [verb<sub>N</sub>] is implied through anaphoric reference(s) stated explicitly earlier in the verse(s) (see Kittay, *Metaphor*, 303ff).
125. Yuyama, *Recension A*, 17, v 2:1: “*rūpasmī yon a sthigate ...*||”; (v 2:2): “... *phalaprāptitāya a-sthito arahanta-bhūmau pratyeka-bhūmī a-sthito tatha buddha-bhūmau*||.” English from Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 13.
126. Yuyama, *Recension A*, 17, v 2:3: “*Yatha nāyako a-sthito dhātu a-saṃskṛtāye tatha saṃskṛtāya a-sthito a-niketa-cārī evaṃ ca sthānu a-sthito sthito bodhisattvo a-sthānu sthānu ayu sthānu jinena ukto*||.” English from Conze, *Eight Thousand Lines*, 13.
127. Ricœur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 51f.
128. Conze, *Buddhist Studies*, 73, 126–27.
129. Yinshun, *Investigation*, 170f, 194ff.
130. Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, 46.
131. Nakamura, *Early Vedānta*, 272.
132. Ibid., 120.
133. Ricœur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 71f.
134. Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean.”
135. Kittay, *Metaphor*, 8; also 226.

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