

ART. XII.—*Tathāgata*. By ROBERT CHALMERS.

THE precise meaning of this familiar title of the Buddha is still unsettled. As the word *tathāgata* is not used either in the Upanishads or (so far as I am aware) in older Sanskrit writings, there exists no available evidence earlier than the Pāli Piṭakas; and there its use is so common as to merit special investigation. Before submitting my own interpretation to the judgment of scholars, I propose to state the views already advanced by others, including the great scholar Buddhaghosa, and next to examine Piṭaka passages in which the title *tathāgata* occurs.

I.

The following are the chief interpretations which have been advanced:—

- (i) Professor Fausböll, *doyen* of Pāli scholars, has the following note at p. 377 of his edition (1855) of the Dhammapada:—

“*Meo judicio primum intelligenda est vox hoc sensu: in tali conditione versans (cfr. supra p. 295 sugata) talis, deinde: praestans, consummatus, beatus*”

- (ii) Childers, in his Pāli Dictionary (1875), says (following the *Abhidhānappadipikā*):—

“It is quite evident that the term *tathāgata* was first applied to a sentient being generally and afterwards transferred to a Buddha. As a name for a Buddha it means the Being *par excellence*, the Great Being (comp. *dipaduttamo narasiho*). Gautama Buddha frequently in the Suttas speaks of himself as the *Tathāgata*, and the

epithet is analogous to that of Son of Man applied to Himself by Jesus Christ. As a name for a sentient being it means 'one who goes in like manner,' i.e., one who goes the way of all flesh, one who is subject to death, a mortal. The native explanations of the term are purely fanciful."

This follows Buddhaghosa's interpretation at *Sum. Vil.*, i, 118: "Hoti tathāgato ti ādisu satto tathāgato ti adhippeto." In dealing with the phrase *Hoti tathāgato param maraṇā* in Part II of this paper, I will endeavour to show that Buddhaghosa's note is not to be construed baldly as a general definition.

(iii) Rhys Davids¹ and Oldenberg have the following note at p. 82 of Part I of their translation of the *Vinaya* (vol. xiii of the Sacred Books of the East, "translated by various Oriental scholars and edited by F. Max Müller") :—

"The term *Tathāgata* is, in the Buddhistical literature, exclusively applied to *Sammāsambuddhas*, and it is more especially used in the *Piṭakas* when the Buddha is represented as speaking of himself in the third person as 'the *Tathāgata*.' The meaning 'sentient being,' which is given to the word in the *Abhidhānappadīpikā* and in Childers's Dictionary, is not confirmed, as far as we know, by any passage of the *Piṭakas*. This translation of the word is very possibly based merely on a misunderstanding of the phrase often repeated in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, *Hoti tathāgato param maraṇā*, which means, of course,² 'does a Buddha exist after death?'

"In the Jaina books we sometimes find the term *tatthagaya* (*tatragata*), 'he who has attained that world, i.e. emancipation,' applied to *Jinas* as opposed to other beings who are called *ihagaya* (*idhagata*), 'living in this world.' See for example the *Jinacaritra*, § 16.

¹ In a note to p. 147 of his "Buddhist Suttas" Rhys Davids does not appear to adopt for himself the view advanced in the *Vinaya* translation.

² But see *infra*, pp. 108-9, where this passage is discussed.

“Considering the close relationship in which most of the dogmatical terms of the Jainas stand to those of the Buddhas, it is difficult to believe that tathāgata and tatthagaya should not originally have conveyed very similar ideas. We think that on the long way from the original Magadhi to the Pāli and Sanskrit, the term tathāgata or tatthāgata (tatra and āgata), ‘he who has arrived there, i.e. at emancipation,’ may very easily have undergone the change into tathāgata, which would have made it unintelligible, were we not able to compare its unaltered form as preserved by the Jainas.”

(It is an obvious comment on the foregoing, even if we ignore the shortness of the antepenultimate *a* in the Jaina term, that the latter, so far from preserving the unaltered original, may itself be a corruption of the Pāli tathāgata, or again may be wholly distinct in origin. Before the above interpretation can be adopted, evidence would require to be forthcoming to support the use of tattha in Pāli as meaning the emancipated state.)

- (iv) Buddhaghosa has a long discussion of tathāgata at pp. 59–68 of *Sumāṅgala Vilāsinī*, vol. i, a discussion which he repeats verbatim in commenting on the first *Majjhima Sutta* in his *Papañca Sūdanī*.

According to Buddhaghosa the title tathāgata is susceptible of eight interpretations:—

1. Tathā āgato, he who has arrived in such fashion, i.e. who has worked his way upwards to perfection for the world’s good in the same fashion as all previous Buddhas.

2. Tathā gato, he who walked in such fashion, i.e. (a) he who at birth took the seven equal steps in the same fashion as all previous Buddhas (cf. *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Sutta* No. 123, in *J.R.A.S.* for October, 1895; and Rhys Davids, “*Buddhist Birth Stories*,” p. 65); or (b) he who in the same way as all previous Buddhas went his way to Buddhahood through the four *Jhānas* and the Paths.

3. *Tatha* and *āgato* (*tatha-lakkhaṇaṃ āgato*), he who by the path of knowledge has come at the real essentials of things.

4. *Tatha* and *āgato* (*tathadhamme yāthāvāto abhisambuddho*), he who has won Truth.

Buddhaghosa explains this rendering as follows:—
 “*Tathadhammā nāma cattāri ariyasaccāni. Yath’ āha*:¹ *Cattār’ imāni, bhikkhave, tathāni avitathāni anaññathāni. Katamāni cattāri? Idam dukkhan ti, bhikkhave, tatham etam avitatham etam anaññatham etan ti. Vitthāro. Tāni ca Bhagavā abhisambuddho. Tasmā tathānam abhisambuddhattā* [by his discovery of the Four Truths] *Tathāgato ti vuccati. Abhisambodhaṭṭho hi ettha gata-saddo.*”

5. *Tatha* and *āgato* (where the paraphrase is *tathadassitāya tathāgato*), he who has discerned Truth. Buddhaghosa cites *Āṅg.*, ii, 23, in support of this rendering.

6. *Tatha* and *āgato* (where *āgato* = *āgado* and the paraphrase is *tathavādītāya tathāgato*), he who declares Truth. Buddhaghosa also suggests here that *gata* = *gada* (the compound being *tathāgado*, ‘one who speaks even as things are’), and cites *Āṅg.*, ii, 24.

7. *Tatha gato* (*tathākāritaya tathāgato*), he whose words and deeds accord (*gato* = *pavatto*).

Buddhaghosa supports this derivation by a quotation from *Āṅguttara*, ii, 24:—“*Ten’ āha: Yathāvādī, bhikkhave, tathāgato tathākārī yathākārī tathāvādī, . . . tasmā tathāgato ti vuccatīti.*”

8. *Tatha* and *agata* [where *agata* = *agada* ‘physic’], the great physician whose physic is all-potent.

Buddhaghosa paraphrases this by ‘*abhibhavanatthena tathāgato*,’ and quotes in support the following from *Āṅguttara*, ii, 24:—“*Ten’ āha: Sadevake, bhikkhave, loke . . . pe . . . manussāya tathāgato abhibhū anabhibhūto añña-datthudaso vasavattī, tasmā tathāgato ti vuccatīti.*”

¹ So far as I know, these words are never used by Buddhaghosa except in quoting from a *Piṭaka* utterance attributed to the Buddha; but I cannot trace the reference.

Trenckner, in commenting on Majjhima, i, 140, cites as follows Buddhaghosa's note thereon in the Papan̄ca Sūdanī : Ettha satto ti pi tathāgato ti adhippeto uttamapuggalo khīnāsavo ti pi (here tathāgata means both creature and arahat). Trenckner goes on to express his own view in the following words: "It here rather retains the original sense of 'such a one,' cf. Suttanip., 30, vv. 13-24; and the other significations of tathāgata may have proceeded from texts like these." (In my opinion the passage in the Sutta Nipāta above referred to, in no wise bears out Trenckner's interpretation. The meaning there is not 'such a one,' but an Arahāt, not necessarily a Buddha, and it will be seen that this meaning is supported by other passages, as well as by Buddhaghosa's paraphrase khīnāsavo here. I may add that, on looking out the above passage in the Royal Asiatic Society's manuscript of the Papan̄ca Sūdanī, I find that the reading there given is not satto 'creature,' as cited by Trenckner, but satthā 'master.' I shall recur to this point on page 110 in discussing Majjhima, i, 140.)

It may be convenient here to summarize the etymologies recorded above.

(i) As regards the latter part of the word tathāgata, Buddhaghosa's fanciful *gada*, *agada*, and *āgada* suggestions may safely be dismissed, so that the choice is limited to *āgata* (which will suit all cases) and *gata* (which can only follow tathā).

(ii) As regards the first part of the word, the rival theories are:—

(a) Tathā (adverb).

Fausböll, Childers, Trenckner, and Buddhaghosa in three out of his eight interpretations.

(b) Tattha.

(Rhys Davids and) Oldenberg.

(c) *Tatha* (adjective).

Buddhaghosa in five out of his eight interpretations.

Leaving commentators and translators for the present, I now proceed to investigate Piṭaka passages where the word *tathāgata* occurs.

II.

In the present state of our knowledge concerning the Pāli Piṭakas, it is difficult to say which of these are original and which are merely derivative compilations. We know that some of the Piṭaka texts are of the latter character, e.g., the *Theragāthā*, the *Itivuttaka*, and the *Dhammapada*. It is probable, too, that, apart from the *Abhidhamma*, the *Saṃyutta* and *Ānguttara Nikāyas* (and possibly also the *Sutta Nipāta*, several Suttas of which occur in the *Majjhima Nikāya*) are little better than rearrangements of the *Dīgha* and *Majjhima Nikāyas*. But, though certain Suttas occur word for word in both of the latter, it has not been suggested, nor is it in any way probable, that these two great Nikāyas are other than original in their general character. It is, therefore, chiefly to the *Dīgha* and *Majjhima* that I have gone for the evidence of the Piṭakas as to the use and meaning of *tathāgata*. While availing myself of the assistance of the *Vinaya*, etc., I have been careful to eschew later Pāli works like the *Jātaka Commentary* all Buddhist texts in Sanskrit.

1. For beginning the study of the Piṭaka use of *tathāgata*, the best passage is that stock passage to which Rhys Davids and Oldenberg refer in the note previously quoted as having probably misled Childers. Let us take the passage as it occurs at *Majjhima*, i, p. 486. Here, as at *Dīgha*, i, p. 188, it is a non-Buddhist, a *paribbājaka*, who asks the Buddha the following question (among others): “*Hoti tathāgato param marañā?* Does a (or the) *tathāgata* exist after

death?"¹ The Buddha having declined to discuss the question, as being matter of useless speculation, the non-Buddhist questioner asks: "Atthi pana bhoto Gotamassa kiñci ditṭhigatan ti? Well, has the reverend Gotama any speculation of his own, then?" To this the Buddha replies: "Ditṭhigatan ti kho apanītam etaṃ tathāgatassa. The tathāgata has put from him what you call speculation." And he proceeds, by way of contrast, to say what the tathāgata has discerned (ditṭham h' etaṃ tathāgatena), viz., the Five Khandhas or elements of being, with their respective origins and ends; and he concludes with the words: "Tasmā tathāgato vimutto ti vadamīti. Therefore is the tathāgata emancipated, I say."

Very instructive is the next question of the non-Buddhist: "Evaṃ vimuttacitto pana, bho Gotama, bhikkhu kuhiṃ uppajjatīti? But whither, Gotama, does such a mentally emancipated bhikkhu go for his future state?" This question shows beyond dispute that, on his side at any rate, the non-Buddhist questioner interpreted tathāgata as a saintly religieus, with no special reference to Gotama in the sense of the Buddha. And it is important to observe that the Buddha does not controvert his questioner's interpretation.

2. The foregoing instance of vimuttacitto bhikkhu may serve to introduce the use of the same term (at Majjh., i, 140) by the Buddha himself. After describing the Arahāt, he goes on to say:—"Evaṃ vimuttacittāṃ kho, bhikkhave, bhikkhūṃ sa-Indā devā sa-Brahmakā sa-Pajāpatikā anvesaṃ nādhigacchanti: Idāṃ nissitaṃ tathāgatassa viññānaṃ ti. Taṃ kissa hetu? Ditṭhe vāham, bhikkhave, dhamme tathāgataṃ ananuvejjo ti vadāmi. Evaṃvadiṃ kho maṃ, bhikkhave, evamakkhayaṃ eke

¹ As noted above in Part I (ii), Buddhaghosa at Sum. Vil., i, 118, says: "Satto tathāgato ti adhippeto." If this be read in the light of lines 3-9 of Majjh., i, 140, the meaning is clear. It is not affirmed that *all* creatures are tathāgatas. Rather the position is that the tathāgata is regarded, for the time being, from the general point of view of a creature, which every tathāgata of course is—though he is also much more. Thus it is as though a Christian commentator, dealing with the words "Christ died upon the Cross," were to say "Christ, i.e. the man (in Christ)." Cf. Part I, v, et infra.

samaṇabrāhmaṇā asatā tucchā musā abhūtena abbhācikkhanti: Venayiko samaṇo Gotamo, sato sattassa ucchedaṃ vināsaṃ vibhavaṃ paññāpetīti. Yathā vāhaṃ, bhikkhave, na, yathā cāhaṃ na vadāmi, tathā maṃ te bhonto samaṇabrāhmaṇā abbhācikkhanti: Venayiko vibhavaṃ paññāpetīti. Pubbe cāhaṃ, bhikkhave, etarabi ca dukkhaṃ c' eva paññāpemi dukkhassa ca nirodhaṃ. Concerning such a mentally emancipated bhikkhu, Brethren, not even the highest of Angels can ascertain where resides the tathāgata's mind. And why? Because even in this present life, here and now, the tathāgata, as I affirm, is one who cannot be traced out. When I say this, and when I affirm this, certain persons falsely assert that I am a nihilist, and preach the extirpation, the destruction, and the annihilation of an existent creature. I am no nihilist; I do not preach such extirpation and annihilation. As in the past, so now too, all that I expound is Suffering and the Cessation of Suffering."

In this, as in the foregoing passage, I submit that at first tathāgata is equivalent simply to vimuttacitto bhikkhu; while it seems equally clear that towards the end of the passage tathāgata is equivalent to ahaṃ, i.e. to the Buddha. And this appears to have been Buddhaghosa's interpretation of the passage. For, in the R.A.S. manuscript of the Papanca Sūdanī, his note is:—"Tathāgatassāti. Ettha satthā ti pi [not satto ti pi, as read by Trenckner at Majjh., i, 542] tathāgato ti adhippeto, uttamapuggalo khīṇāsavo ti pi.—Here tathāgata denotes both the Master and an Arahāt." If satto be read (to the detriment of the sense), the explanation will be that given in the note on p. 109 to Hoti tathāgato param maraṇā.

3. In the former of the two passages discussed above, the term tathāgata is used by a non-Buddhist, the question being the familiar non-Buddhist question "Hoti tathāgato param maraṇā?" Even more noteworthy—as showing non-Buddhist familiarity with the term—is the emphatic use of the title by Gotama himself, at the very outset of his career as a Buddha, in his very first words to his

first converts, the five bhikkhus with whom (Majjh., i, 170) he had practised vain austerities. When Gotama comes back to his old companions, and when they addressed him in the old familiar style (Majjh., i, 171)—“Hereupon (says the Buddha in relating the incident) I said to those five Bhikkhus: ‘Mā bhikkhave tathāgataṃ nāmena ca āvusovadena ca samudācarittha.’ O bhikkhus, do not address a (or the) tathāgata by his ordinary name or as reverend sir.” To me it seems impossible to mistake the deliberate challenge involved in this initial sentence addressed by the new Buddha to his old companions and intended converts. He claims at the very outset a title which he knew to be so well known to them, and so tremendous in its accepted connotation, that they were constrained either to expose him as a charlatan or to follow him as their spiritual lord.

At first the Buddha, as he states, “was unable to convince the five bhikkhus.” It was only when he went on to deliver the discourse which is given at Vinaya, i, 10, and in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, that they were converted to Buddhism. By comparing Majjh., i, 167 and 173, it will be seen that the intellectual process was the same, and is described in the same words by the Buddha, alike for the attainment of Arahatsip by the Five Bhikkhus and for the attainment of Buddhahood by himself.

4. In contrast with the two passages discussed in paragraphs 1 and 2 above, is Sutta I of the Majjhima Nikāya, where the tathāgata is expressly differentiated from the Arahāt or khīṇāsavo bhikkhu. Here the title occurs in its familiar setting and amplificatory definition—tathāgato arahāṃ sammāsambuddho, “the tathāgata, the Arahāt, the Very Buddha”—which recurs so often in the Buddha’s stock passage (e.g. Dīgha, i, 62):—“Idha tathāgato loke uppaṅgati arahāṃ sammāsambuddho. So imaṃ lokaṃ . . . sayāṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā pavedeti ādikalyāṇaṃ . . . , kevalaparipuṇṇaṃ parisuddhaṃ brahmacariyaṃ pakāseti.— A tathāgata arises in the world: he explains the world,

having of himself grasped and realized it. He preaches the Doctrine . . . and proclaims the perfect way of holiness."

5. At *Dīgha*, i, 229, *Ānguttara*, ii, 117, *Vinaya*, v, 121, and elsewhere, the Buddha speaks of *tathāgatappaveditaṃ dhammavinayaṃ*, "the Doctrine and the Rule preached by the *tathāgata*"; and at *Majjhima*, i, 111, and *Vinaya*, iii, 42, the Buddha calls himself *dhammasāmī tathāgato*, "the *tathāgata*, lord of truth." In this connection I point out the frequent close connection between *tathāgata* and *dhamma* (e.g., *Majjh.*, i, 83, 85, 136, 331), or between *tathāgata* and *sāvaka* (e.g. *Āng.*, ii, 34; *Majjh.*, i, 85, 136, 332, 371). This connection is shown clearly at *Vinaya*, i, 43: "Nayanti ve mahāvīrā saddhammena *tathāgatā*.—It is by means of true doctrine that the great conquerors, the *tathāgatas*, lead men."

6. The passages just quoted are passages in which the Buddha uses the title of himself; and this is the general usage of the term. Unless—like *Ānanda* at *Dīgha*, i, 206, or *Assaji* at *Vinaya*, i, 40—they are expounding Buddhism *ex cathedra* to non-believers, Buddhists rarely use the title *tathāgata* in speaking of the Buddha; and even when so expounding, Buddhists use the title with a special significance: e.g., at *Majjhima*, i, 356, *Ānanda*, in preaching to *Mahānāma* the Sakyan, says (like the Buddha himself at *Majjhima*, ii, 128):—"Idha ariyasāvako saddho hoti saddahati *tathāgatassa* bodhiṃ: Iti pi so *bhagavā* araham̐ sammāsambuddho . . . buddho *bhagavā* ti. Here a disciple of the Noble One gets faith, and has faith in the *tathāgata*'s illumination, so that he believes: This Worshipful One is the *Arahat*, the Very Buddha . . ." Here the disciple, as opposed to the expositor, uses the title "*Bhagavā*." Similarly (e.g.) the Brahmin *Pokkharasādi* (*Dīgha*, i, 87) and the *Licchavis* (*Dīgha*, i, 151), in using the stock passage cited above, are careful to begin with the words "Iti pi so *bhagavā* araham̐ sammāsambuddho," and not with the Buddha's own formula: *Idha tathāgato*, etc. Another example occurs at *Dīgha*, i, 95, where the Buddha threatens

a recalcitrant young Brahmin in the words: “Yo kho tathāgatena yāva tatiyakam sahadhammikam pañham puṭṭho na vyākaroti, etth’ eva assa sattadhā muddhā phalissatīti.” But the demon who appeared to split the young Brahmin’s head accordingly, in repeating the words of the threat, is careful to substitute another title for tathāgata, and says: “Sacāyam Ambaṭṭho māṇavo *bhagavatā* yāva tatiyakam sahadhammikam pañham puṭṭho na vyākarissati, etth’ eva sattadhā muddham phālessāmīti.” Cf. Vinaya, iii, 2.

7. The most remarkable exceptions to the rule that in the Piṭakas Buddhists avoid using the title tathāgata, are two, viz. :—

(i) Ānanda, “the beloved disciple,” uses the term in speaking to the Buddha at (e.g.) Majjhima, ii, 45, and frequently in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta; and

(ii) The second exception occurs also in the last-named Sutta, in the following passage: “Atha kho Bhagavā bhikkhū āmantesi: Handa dāni, bhikkhave, āmantayāmi vo: Vayadhammā saṅkhārā, appamādena sampadethāti. Ayaṃ tathāgatassa pacchimā vācā. — Then the Blessed One said to the Brethren: Behold now, Brethren, I exhort you, saying: ‘Decay is inherent in all component things. Work out your salvation with diligence.’ This was the last word of the tathāgata.”

III.

I am not aware of any passage in any Piṭaka text which, in any material point, conflicts with the series of passages above quoted, in the light of which I now proceed to submit my own interpretation of the word.

Tathāgata, in my opinion, is derived from the adjective *tatha* and *āgata*, and means “one who has come at the real truth.” Hence, in the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, Ajātasattu argues from the etymology when he says: “Na hi

tathāgatā vitatham bhāṇantīti.—For no untrue word is spoken by (those who, as their name imports, are) truth-winners.” In this sense tathāgata was a title already familiar to Indian thinkers before Gotama’s day, denoting one who had reached the goal of intellectual emancipation. In this sense, too, it was adopted by Gotama, who, while not denying the title to those who had won the supreme goal of Arahatsip, specially appropriated it to himself as the Arahāt *par excellence*, and so came to use the title (as his disciples used it of him) as a solemn claim to recognition as the pioneer of truth, the founder of true religion in theory and practice. The truth Gotama claimed to have won, and to have been the first to win, is formulated in the Four Truths relating to Suffering and the Cessation of Suffering: cattār’ imāni, bhikkhave, tathāni avitathāni anaññathāni.—“Four in number, Brethren, are these truths that can never be untrue, can never be other than they are.” In the Buddha’s mouth, therefore, the title tathāgata assumes usually the specialized meaning of discoverer of the Four Truths, i.e. founder of Buddhism.

I have said above that even the Buddha himself did not deny the title of tathāgata to an Arahāt. For this, I think, a good reason can be given, apart from pre-Buddhist use of the term to denote a saint who had won emancipation of mind. That reason is that Arahatsip was the supreme goal of Gotama’s Buddhism—*tad anuttaram brahmacariya-pariyosānam*. This supreme goal every Arahāt had to win by his own thought and effort (*sayam abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja*) in precisely the same manner as the Buddha. In the Ariyapariyesana Sutta, therefore, the Buddha describes the process of the conversion of the Five Bhikkhus in precisely the same words as those in which he describes the process of his own attainment of Buddhahood, the hour of triumph being marked in each case, alike by Buddha and by Arahāt bhikkhu, with the jubilant words: “Akuppā me vimutti, ayam antimā jāti, na ’tthi dāni punabbhavo. Sure is my emancipation; this is my last birth; I shall never be born again.”

Consequently, it is not without significance that the very first title assumed by the new Buddha was not sammā-sambuddha, but tathāgata; nor is it, perhaps, a mere coincidence that in the Sutta of the Great Decease the now aged Buddha assumes the same title with markedly greater frequency than elsewhere, while the writer or editor of the Sutta, in recording the Buddha's dying word says: "Ayaṃ tathāgatassa pacchimā vācā.—This was the last word (not of the Buddha but) of the tathāgata, the truth-winner." It would almost seem as though, alike at the dawn and at the close of his Buddhahood, the Buddha, with a shrewd foreboding of Mahāyāna heresies to be, was sedulous to select a title which should exalt, not Buddhahood, but Arahatsip. "Tumhehi kiccaṃ ātappaṃ, akkhātaro tathāgatā.—The struggle must be your own; those who have won the truth can but point the way."¹

¹ Dhammapada, p. 49.