In pre-Buddhist India, the term *tathagata* designated a liberated sage. Unlike other titles for Gotama Buddha common in Pali scriptures such as *bhagavan* (blessed one) and *jina* (victorious one), the Buddha often used the term *tathagata* to refer to himself. As George Bond has noted, three etymologies for it are prominent in Theravāda texts: 1) *tatha-gato*, meaning “one who has gone thus,” who has attained nirvana like all prior buddhas, freed from the conditioned, distorted mentalities and sufferings of mundane existence. 2) *tatha-agato*, meaning “one who has come thus,” who has reached the attainment achieved by all buddhas of prior ages, propelling him to come as the universal teacher for this age. 3) *tatha-agato*, meaning one who has come to the final truth of things and shows the way to that truth (Bond p. 352, *Dīgha-Nikāya* 3.135, *Anguttara Nikāya* 2.25, *Majjhima Nikāya* 3.6).

To call Gotama Buddha *tathagata* was to identify him as a type, the latest in the line of perfect buddhas from past ages, highlighting his attainment as supreme for this age. All *tathagatas* are said to be one in their essential attainments, including four peerless types of fearlessness, ten powers of pervasive knowing (such as knowledge of the causal order, of the capacities, dispositions and destinies of living beings, and of the methods of spiritual development appropriate for each one), six types of perfected supernormal awareness, unconditional compassion, thirty-two exemplary marks of physical perfection, and other excellences (*Majjhima Nikāya* 1.69-73).
In line with the first and third etymologies of *tathāgata* above, to call Gotama *tathagata* was to designate him the personification of the dharma, of the truths and attainments that he had realized. Thus, what made him a *tathagata* was his *dharma-kaya* (Pali *dhamma-kaya*), his body of dharma attainments, made manifest through the physical signs and charismatic powers of his material body, his *rupa-kaya* (*Samyuta Nikaya* 3.120, *Dīgha-Nikaya* 3.84, Bond 353).

In line with the second etymology of *tathagata*, “one come thus as universal teacher,” to call Gotama *tathagata* was also to designate him the most worthy and karmically weighty object of reverence and offerings (*Majjhima Nikaya* 3.255-257). The Buddha, his community and teaching were generously supported by the offerings of devotees during his lifetime. After physical death, the physical embodiment and presence of the Buddha (*rupa-kaya*) was re-presented to the world in sacred reliquary mounds containing his relics (stupas), which became focal objects of offering and circumambulation, symbolically re-enacting the ways that Gotama’s devotees had offered reverence to him as reported in scriptures. Stupas, and later buddha images, by ritually affirming the Buddha’s continuing presence in the world as symbolic container (*rupa-kaya*) of his all-knowing mind (*dharma-kaya*), symbolically affirmed the Buddha’s continuing power for this world, enabling devotees through the centuries to establish their own relationship to the Buddha at those sacred sites,. Stupas and images provide physical supports both for rituals of offering and blessing, and for meditations that vividly bring to mind the Buddha’s qualities and powers (*buddhanusmrti*). Thus, in the early centuries after the Buddha’s final nirvana, connotations of *tathagata* informed the emerging two *kaya* paradigm of buddhahood and religious practices centered upon it.
In several Abhidhama schools prior to the rise of Mahayana Buddhist movements, sa’sara and nirvana were framed as a fundamental dualism, nirvana understood as an unconditioned reality totally beyond the dependent origination of conditioned life, attained by cutting off the inmost causes for the five aggregates of conditioned life, for all components of mind and body, through long practice of the path. The pre-Mahayana etymologies of tathagata noted above express that dualism: “thus gone” to nirvana beyond the conditioned arising of samsara, “thus come” from that transcendent attainment to reveal the path of liberation before passing totally beyond the world at final nirvana.

But in the centuries after Gotama Buddha’s physical passing, in some quarters of the Buddhist world, the ritual and meditative practices mentioned above which symbolically affirmed the continuing presence and power of the Buddha’s nirvana in this world, together with further developments in practice and philosophy, gradually shifted doctrinal formulation of a Buddha’s nirvana toward non-dualism: understanding a buddha’s nirvana to be undivided from this world in its pervasive awareness, liberating power and activity. This reformulating of a buddha’s nirvana began to take doctrinal expression in Mahasamghika schools a few centuries after the Buddha’s parinirvana, and was much further developed in Mahayana texts from the first century BCE onward, where it became formalized as the doctrine of the “unrestricted” (all-active) nirvana of the buddhas (apratisthita-nirvana). In this formulation, a buddha’s nirvana was said to far exceed that of his arhat disciples, because it comprised not only freedom from bondage to conditioned causes of suffering, but also freedom to unleash vast and endless liberating activity for living beings (Makransky, pp. 85-108, 319-365).
Several factors contributing to this reformulation of nirvana took expression in Mahayana scriptures of the early centuries CE, including the emergence of a new Mahayana cosmology, a non-dual ontology of emptiness, and further development in practices and doctrines of devotion, compassion and non-dual awareness.

Influenced in part by the new meeting of cultures and cosmologies in the Kusana empire of central Asia of the early centuries CE, and in part by a new emphasis upon many persons taking up the bodhisattva path (each of whom would generate their own realm of buddha activity as fruition of that path), Mahayana scriptures expressed a new Buddhist cosmology of numerous tathagatas simultaneously inhabiting different universes in all directions, often in radiant pure realms attended by celestial bodhisattvas (not just appearing individually from age to age). In many Mahayana scriptures, the yogic powers of Buddha Gotama or advanced bodhisattvas opened devotees’ perception to visions of cosmic tathagatas such as Amitabha, Aksobhya and Vairocana whom devotees ritually reverenced and praised, to whom they made manifold offerings, and from whom they received manifold radiant blessings. Scenes like this are prominent, for example, in the Avatamsaka sutra collection, several Prajnaparamita sutras, Vimalakirti, Suramgamasamadhi, Samadhiraja, Saddharmapundarika.

In such scriptures, visual or oral encounters with cosmic tathagatas often precede or follow a bodhisattva’s realization of transcendental wisdom (prajna-paramita), the non-dual awareness of tathagatas and advanced bodhisattvas that discerns the emptiness of all phenomena (sunyata), their lack of substantial, independent existence. The empty nature of phenomena, because known by the tathagatas just thus, is frequently referred to as thusness (tathata). Although all conditioned phenomena continually change,
their intrinsically empty nature never changes, is unconditioned, and undivided like space. Whereas pre-Mahayana Abhidharma schools taught penetrating insight (*vipassana*) to cut off the dependent origination of conditioned phenomena and thus attain the unconditioned peace of nirvana beyond them, Mahayana texts taught that the very nature of conditioned phenomena was unconditioned emptiness (*sunyata*), thusness (*tathata*), intrinsic peace. Hence, these texts proclaimed, to realize ordinary phenomena as empty, intrinsically quiescent, is to realize nirvana as undivided from samsara (Makransky p. 323).

One way to express this Mahayana metaphysic of non-dualism was through playful reinterpretation of previous Buddhist etymologies for *tathagata*. Thus the Buddha declares in the *Aastasahasrika* (8000 verse) *Prajnaparamita sutra*, “*Tathagatas* (literally ones who have ‘thus gone’ or ‘thus come’) certainly do not come from anywhere, nor do they go anywhere. For indeed thusness (*tathata*) is unmoving, and the *Tathagata* is thusness.” *Tathagatas* are those whose awareness has become non-dual with thusness, who thereby abide in the ultimate, unmoving nature of all phenomenal comings and goings, the undivided, empty, *nirvanic* dimension of this world (Makransky p. 32).

This implies that the awareness through which a buddha or bodhisattva transcends bondage to samsara is also intimate with samsara. To know all living beings non-dually through undivided thusness is to sense all beings through boundless, unconditional compassion and love. The bodhisattva path to buddhahood is therefore described as a synergy of deepening wisdom of emptiness (*prajnaparamita*) and compassionate activity for beings (*punya*, spiritual merit). Bodhisattvas, by thereby accumulating vast wisdom and merit, under the guidance and protection of
the tathagatas, generate luminous pure realms from which to enact their own salvific activity as they become tathagatas upon completion of their path. Thus the tathagatas, viewed from above as celestial powers and from below as the fruition of the bodhisattva path, spontaneously radiate blessings, salvific activities and manifestations throughout their domains, making the liberating power of nirvana available to beings in samsara as the compassionate outflow of their knowledge that nirvana and samsara are ultimately undivided (Williams 121-127, 224, 255; Makransky pp. 90-108, 323-361).

Because, Mahayana texts say, thusness (tathata) as the empty non-dual reality of all things is undivided, the term “tathagata” now also connotes undividedness among the tathagatas in their essential realization of it, referred to as dharmakaya (Mahayanasutralamkara chapter 9, Mahayanasamgraha chapter 10, Makransky chapters 3 and 5). Likewise, in thusness, all living beings are undivided from the tata›gatas and possessed of a primordial purity of awareness which constitutes an innate potential for enlightenment, referred to as the tathagata essence of beings (tathagata-garbha), their intrinsic buddha nature (Ratnagotra-vibhaga chapter 1). The ontological oneness of buddhas in non-dual thusness supports a communion of tathagatas and celestial bodhisattvas in their visionary manifestations (witnessed in Mahayana scriptures by interactions among visionary tathagatas), which, when informed by the teaching of buddha nature, opens into a communion with all living beings. Reverent gestures of bowing and offering are given vivid ritual forms in liturgies such as the seven part offering practice at the end of the Gandavyuha sutra (Williams p. 126) which includes praise, offering, confession, ritual rejoicing, ritual requests,
bodhisattva resolutions to attain enlightenment for beings, and dedication of
merit to all, while receiving radiant blessings from all the holy beings. Such
practices express deepening communion with and participation in the
salvific activity of the tathagatas and bodhisattvas in and through the
luminous, empty ground of thusness in which all are ultimately undivided.

Elements of such liturgical materials were taken up by Buddhist
practice communities of Central Asia, East Asia and Tibet as means to
collect merit and wisdom for the path, to receive blessings and inspiration
from the tathagatas and celestial bodhisattvas, and to mediate their power to
surrounding communities for healing, protection, prosperity, auspiciousness
and well being. In this way, practices mediating the power of tathagatas and
bodhisattvas became an important part of the activity of Mahayana monastic
institutions of medieval India, East Asia and Tibet, whose social, economic
and political support by local communities was motivated in part by
communal desires for the application of such ritual power to meet social
needs.

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John Makransky