

The 33

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After my dawn exercise this morning, I bought some breakfast at the Jurong East market. On my way out, a middle-aged woman roughly and physically brushed by me, as I stopped just in time to avoid knocking into her. For a moment, I recalled the story of Magha (the future Lord Sakra) in the Dhammapada Commentary (DhA 2.7).

The brahmin youth **Magha**, it is said, went to the business centre of his village Macala in Magadha. With his foot, he cleared the dirt and debris on the ground and stood in that comfortable spot. Then, a person nudged him away and took his place. Instead of being angry, he moved to another spot and did the same thing again.

Again, another person came along, nudged him away and took over his place. Untroubled, he moved to yet another spot, and cleaned it up and stood there as before. This went on for a few more times. Then prince Magha thought: "All these people appear to be pleased. Since my work conduce to their happiness, it must be an act of merit."

Magha and his companions

The following day, Magha brought along a spade and cleared a space as large as a threshing-floor, whereupon men came and stood there. In cold weather, he built a fire to warm them, so that the place was a favourite resort for all who came.

Then, Magha thought that he should do more, and started making the roads even. He even cut down tree branches that were in the way. And so he spent his time working on public comfort in that way.

Another man saw him and asked what he was doing. He replied, "I'm making the path to heaven!" The man decided to be his companion. Then, another saw them, and the same thing happened, until there were 33 of them. They all worked together created more comfortable places for the public.

False accusations

The village headman saw them and thought that their time would have been better spent in something economically production like fishing and hunting, and indulging in the pleasures of drunk, and so on. When the headman spoke to the 33 young men, they were unmoved, which angered the headman.

Seeking to destroy them, he went to the rajah (the king) and falsely accused them of banditry. The rajah had them seized, and summarily decided to execute them by being trampled by elephants. Magha advised his companions, "We have no refuge but love! Calm your hearts. Show not anger. Show love for the rajah, the village headman and the elephants!" So great was the power of their love that the elephants refused to harm them in any way.

Great good deeds

When the rajah realized his error, he at once rewarded the 33 with a riding elephant and gave the village of Macala to them. Magha and his companions happily went about building a public hall, planted trees, dug wells, grew flower-gardens, and other public deed for the joy and good of the people.

For himself, Magha ministered dutifully to his parents, honoured the elders, spoke the truth, conversed pleasantly, avoided backbiting, gave generously and showed no anger. These were his 7 precepts. When he died, he was reborn in the heaven of the 33 as **Sakra**, lord of the devas (sakka devānam inda). His companions were likewise reborn there.

The suras

Now, at that time the **suras** (the old gods) were dwelling in the heaven of the 33, and they were given to strong drink. To welcome **the new gods** (Magha and his companions), the old gods ordered strong drinks to be prepared. Magha, however, instructed his companions not to touch any of the drinks.

When the suras became intoxicated, Magha thought: “Why should I share this kingdom with such heedless suras?” Giving a sign to his companions, they grabbed the suras by their heels and threw them down into the great ocean below.

Battles between the devas and the asuras

It is said that as the suras were falling their long way down from their heaven, they came to. Realizing how they have been toppled on account of strong drinks, their leader exclaimed: “No more strong drinks (asura)!”

The asuras fell headlong into the ocean. But by their merit, the asura palace sprang up for them at the foot of Mt Sineru (the world axis), and at the heart of the palace ground grew a wish-fulfilling trumpet flower tree (*citta, pāṭali*).

The wish-fulfilling tree is like a limited version of “the Infinity Gauntlet” which the Marvel comic character Thanos used to destroy half the universe to win the love of Mistress Death (a female version of Māra). “The Infinity Gauntlet” is also the title of a 6-issue limited series (1991) that had a cult following.

When it was time, the trumpet flower tree blossomed beautifully. Whenever this happened, the asuras wishfully recalled their beloved coral tree (*parichattaka*) in the heaven of the 33. Then, the asura leader mustered the asuras and raided the heaven of the 33. The devas of the heaven of the 33 would fight back. And so began the constant battles between the asuras and the devas.

The Buddha

With the coming of **the Buddha**, the lives of devas of the sense-world and brahmas of the form worlds changed. **Brahmā**, the oldest and highest of the Vedic gods—revered as the creator of the world—was converted by the Buddha and became a non-returner. **Indra** (Sakra’s name when he was a Vedic god), too, was converted and became a streamwinner.

Indra was the most popular of the Vedic gods. The ancient brahmins composed hymns to invoke such gods as Indra, of which there were 33. Of the 1,028 Ṛgveda hymns, 289 were composed glorifying him (the most verses for any Vedic god). Clearly, he was the most popular of the Vedic gods.

In the Ṛgveda, Indra’s title of purandara, “destroyer of cities,” is mentioned at least 11 times. As a Buddhist, he is now known more amicably as purindada, “the one who gave offerings before” (pure pure dānaṃ adāsi), as told in the Sakka, nāma Sutta (S 11.12).

Divine coverts

Both Brahma and Sakra dutifully appear, often playing leading roles in key events of the life of the Bodhisattva and Buddha—such as the birth, the great renunciation, the awakening, the descent at Sankassa and the great parinirvana. **The Sakka Saṃyutta** (S 11), the shortest of the saṃyuttas, nevertheless has 25 suttas relating to him (SD 54.2).

Understandably, during the Puranic period, the brahmins created new myths to condition their followers into not worshipping both these two greatest of their gods, and to turn to the new gods they have created. This was a shrewd ideological move by the brahmins to forestall Buddhist influence.

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