

Evolution as natural seduction

Excerpt from *SD 61a: Māra, A Buddhist mythology of evil and embodiment of badness* by TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) © 2023.

1.1.3.1 We will here briefly look at 2 verses about **sexual seduction**: one from the Sutta Nipāta and the other from the Therīgāthā. The first verse, from **the Nālaka Sutta** (Sn 3.11), comes from the Sutta's introductory verses (*vatthu, gāthā*), and is part of the instruction given by the sage Asita to his nephew and pupil Nālaka:

*uccâvacā niccharanto
dāyo aggi, sikhûpamā
nariyo munim palibhenti
tā su taṃ mā palobhayum*

This and that [good and bad]¹ emerge,
like a forest of fiery crests.
Women may try to tempt a sage—
may they never tempt you!

Sn 703, (SD 49.18)

In **Sn 703**, the sage Asita is instructing Nālaka to avoid the 2 extremes in the latter's religious life as a renunciant. One should avoid sensuality, especially with women (or any kind of sensual relationship), and also avoid any attachment to the forest of good and bad. In other words, one should keep the mind focused on one's spiritual practice to attain the path of awakening.

The line "**women may try to tempt a sage**" (*nariyo munim palibhenti*) should not be construed as a sexist statement but as reflective of the patriarchal situation in India then (and even today). As in ancient Greek mythology, the ancient Indians, too, tend to depict their gods and spirits as enjoying the highest of sensual pleasures that clearly epitomize and glorify sexuality, even treating it as sacred since life arises from it. As a rule, however, it is the women who suffer the brunt of this manly lust and leaning.

In terms of evolutionary psychology, it is understandable that **women** capable of bearing children would seek the best of partners to populate the world; the quality of their children will surely make it a better world. What better candidate for a wholesome progeny than the issues of the wisest and holiest of men! Asita, keeping to the muni (silent sage) tradition, of which the Buddha is the best example, is simply reminding Nālaka of the true purpose of renunciation: to attain the path out of samsaric life.

1.1.3.2 Hence, women are not the problem; sexuality is. Women are capable of awakening in the path; sexuality distracts and distances us all from the path of awakening. This is, in fact, the subtext of the second verse, the one from **the Therīgāthā**. These are the verses related to the beautiful nun, **Subhā**, resident of Jīvaka's mango grove (*jīvak'amba, vanikā*). **The Subhā Jīvaka'amba, vanikā Therīgāthā** (Thī ch 71) is about how a beautiful nun alone in a blossoming grove is confronted by a young rogue infatuated with her.

¹ "This and that" refers to mind-objects.

For the most part, they form a “fugue” or verbal duel between the young male rogue (embodying lust or playing the role of Māra) and the beautiful nun (representing a celibate life of renunciation for the path). In this verse, she sternly warns the rogue that she is a spiritually developed person who will never fall for his wiles:

*yassa siyā apaccavekkhitam
satthā vā anupāsito siyā
tvaṃ tādīsikaṃ palobhaya
jānantim so imam vihaññasi*

It may be for one who reviews not (one’s actions),
or it may be for one who has not seen the Teacher,
you can try to seduce² someone like that—
this one knows—you will grieve over this!

Thī 387, (SD 20.7)

Here it is a **man** who tries to seduce a woman. Hence, seduction is not merely about being a woman or a man, but more about remaining as sexual beings to populate the world and keep samsara going—this is what Māra does, and sex is the embodiment of Māra himself. Note that Māra is conceived as a male, clearly reflecting the views and mores of a patriarchal society.

We thus see here how the **symbolism of evil** works—whether it is the human inclination to seduce others, that is, to impose his existential power over others, or it is Māra, that is, evil personified—the theme is that of **seduction** or **temptation**. *To seduce* is, lexically, to persuade someone to have sex with you. *To tempt* is to attract someone or make someone want to do or have something, even if they know it is wrong, or to convince them that it is all right. In either case, in terms of Māra’s role or his qualities, to be seduced or be tempted is to act in a way that is likely to fail to see the better that one can be when one understands the reality of the situation. Māra, as it were, works to make us choose to be seduced or tempted; it’s palpably more fun that way!

Finally, a note on not taking evil lightly—dismissing Māra as *merely* a “psychological” state or that he is *just* a “personification.” Māra is as real as our greed, hatred and delusion. Māra is psychologically real just as our fears and emotions are real to us, and others suffer or are deceived on that account. Māra is *personified* in each and every one who is awakened, in us. Hold up a mirror and you will likely see Māra.

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² Be Ee Se *palobhaya*; Ce *palohaya* [prec]. Comy had various readings. Comy (M): **palobhassa upachandassa** = ~ means “have seduced.” Comy (Be): **palobhaya upagaccha** = “‘have lusted for’ means have approached.” Comy (Ce): **palobhaya upacchandaya** = ~ means “have lusted for.” Skt *upacchand-* occurs, in the causative, meaning “entice, seduce” (SED sv). In Skt *pralubh-* means “to lust after,” and the causative means “to cause to lust after, allure, entice, attempt to seduce” (SED sv), which fits exactly here. For *so* with 2nd person vb, see Thī:N 24n.