

The Buddha and Prometheus

In terms of comparative mythology—comparing early Buddhism with Greek mythology—the Buddha who brings liberating knowledge to the world is a Prometheus figure, mankind’s fire-bringer and light-giver. In Greek mythology, Prometheus (meaning “forethought”) is a Titan.¹ Known for his wily intelligence, he is mankind’s champion, who steals fire from Zeus and gives it to mortals; or, according to some sources, mankind already had fire, but Zeus takes it away from them. Prometheus is also said to have taught mankind numerous crafts.²

Zeus then punishes him for his fervent protection and patronage of mankind by having him chained to a rock in the Caucasus, while a great eagle tears out and devours his liver. Since Prometheus is a Titan, his liver regenerates, but the eagle comes again the next morning to devour it again, day after day. Prometheus is finally rescued by Heracles, who kills the eagle and unchains him.

Almighty Zeus, in revenge, creates the first woman, the beautiful Pandora (“all-giving”) and gives her a special box. On earth, Epimetheus (“afterthought”), Prometheus’s slow-witted brother makes her his wife, forgetting his brother’s warning not to accept any gift from the gods. When the box is opened, every human misery escape and infest the world, only Hope remaining behind.

Zeus, the high god, is determined to keep mankind in the darkness and deprivation of their ignorance, so that the world remains subservient to the gods, so that “as flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods.”³ Zeus thus plays the role of Māra in early Buddhism, by keeping us from awakening so that we remain subject to his world.

Actually, it is Epimetheus, Prometheus’ foolish brother, who fits the role of Māra better. For the Buddhist Māra is neither as maleficent nor as powerful as Zeus. Even though Māra wields almighty power over the sense-world, he never succeeds in preventing the Buddha in his efforts.⁴ Like Epimetheus, Māra lacks wisdom and compassion, and as such can only follow his ignorance and instincts.

Yet, Māra is a high god himself, said to inhabit the Para,nimmitta Vasavatti world: he is even higher than the “Creator Gods,” who delights in creating (Nimmāṇa,raṭī, “who delight in creation”). So great is Māra’s power that he has the fiat to order these powerful gods to do the creating for him! But for such a powerful high god to lack wisdom can be devastating for the world. Like a narcissistic adolescent, he desires everything for himself, to have the entire world under his sway.

The Buddha is beyond Māra’s reach because he (the Buddha) has *transcended thought*: he is “Metametheus,” as it were. He is controlled neither by forethought nor by afterthought. Even as a god, Prometheus is not really free, but has to work his wiles to outwit Zeus. The Buddha, on the other hand, is beyond the power of any god or God. Furthermore, he is teacher to both the gods and humans (*sathā deva,manussānam*).

¹ The Titans, six male and six female, are the “old” god, the offspring of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven), ie before the rise of the “new” gods led by Zeus. Cf the rise of Shakra and the 33 gods (*tāvatiṃsa*) by expelling the old gods from that heaven (J 1:202; DhA 1:272-280; cf SnA 484 f).

² See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prometheus>; also Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology, edd Luke & Monica Roman, Facts-On-File, 2010: Prometheus, Prometheus Bound.

³ Shakespeare, *King Lear* 4.1.

⁴ See **Māra** = SD 61.8. **Brahma Nimantanika S** (M 49) depicts Māra as having to power even over Mahā Brahmā and his host in their own heaven. The Buddha however sees him out. (M 49/1:326-331) = SD 11.7.

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Buddhist training begins with the disciplining of our body and speech for the sake of mental development. In other words, we need to examine how our body-based lives often stun, even stunt, our mental lives. If we live simply dictated by what we see, what we smell, what we hear, what we taste, and what we touch, we remain as Māra's subjects. We become moths drawn to the open flame of greed, hate and ignorance. Like Prometheus, we die because of our self-made fires, devouring over and again, until our chains are broken.

Prometheus is eventually released from his chains, free from the eagle's daily tearing out his liver, to become whole again. Our night of spiritual dismemberment begins to end when we learn to free ourselves from being dominated by our physical faculties. We are *re-membered*, as it were—we truly become a unified being—by even momentarily rising above our physical sensibilities to more profound joy and peace.

When we have fully freed ourselves from our physical selves, we are able to open the door of our breath and enter our inner space as mental beings of supreme bliss. Even if we are unable to enter that breath-door, just standing there and looking into it, can profoundly and lastingly energize us so that we return to the sense-world as masters of our faculties. In short, we are a beautiful mind in a beautiful body. More importantly, as masters of our minds and thoughts, we are forever beyond the power of any god, God, devil, or Māra. For we are *buddhas*.

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