

Māra's theology¹

Māra and the Buddha are opposites. Māra keeps us in samsara, while the Buddha teaches us liberation from it. Māra rules supreme over all the “round of the 3 worlds.” It is the nature of these 3 worlds to *recycle* itself with birth and death, rebirth and redeath, ad infinitum. It is this tantalizing but painful reality that is personified as Māra, or metaphorically described as “Māra’s realm.”

The nature of our 6 sense-bases is to replicate and perpetuate themselves. They are the ultimate “memes”² (self-replicators)—they run after pleasurable sense-data and try to collect and store them as our “experience.” This experience may be seen as the evolving karmic genes and the genomes that create the different realms of existence, and sustain them. Māra, then, is a metaphor for the desire for “eternal” existence.³

Māra as death

Although Yama is lord of the underworld, he neither brings death nor suffering upon the hell-being. It is clear from **the (Yama) Deva,dūta Sutta** (A 3.35) that he is, in fact, a kind of counsellor who keeps reminding us to heed the “divine messengers” of decay, disease and death so that we do not have to appear before him. The suffering that we have to face after meeting Yama is not a judgement of Yama, but our own self-inflicted bad karma.⁴

Māra’s concern is broader than that of Yama’s role. Māra sees himself as the Lord of all he surveys, that is, the whole of samsara. His presence is most palpable in the sense-world, but his vision reaches wherever there any sentience, even to the form and the formless worlds (for the unawakened). For as long as we remain unawakened in the world—even as the most long-lived gods—we will still die. Māra dupes us into thinking that heaven is eternal life. But there is no heaven with the earth. The reality is that he keeps us in the cycle of **eternal death**. For this reason, he is known as Maccu Māra, the personification of death.

Māra is the world

Māra entices us to remain in this world and create karma. According to **the Padhāna Sutta**, Māra appears before the Bodhisattva performing self-mortification on the verge of death and, feigning concern, coaxes him not to die, but live and perform religious rituals to gain merits. (Sn 427 f)

Here, Māra is the preserver of the *status quo* of the fixed old ways, the way of dogmatic religion. He discourages us from seeking spiritual growth, or even to change, and entices them to keep things “just as they were.” The status quo is Māra’s playpen to keep us under his power.⁵

¹ This reflection is an abridgement of [SD 50.8](#) (1.2.1+1.2.2).

² See **Mememes**, [SD 26.3](#) esp (2-3).

³ See [SD 50.8](#) (2.6.2).

⁴ A 3.35 ([SD 48.10](#)).

⁵ **Padhāna Sutta** (Sn 3.2), [SD 18.7](#)(6.4).

Māra says: "Just be good!"

Māra is at his subtlest cunning when it comes to religion. He likes to keep things really simple so that we enjoy it. "Just be good!" Do "good," perform acts of merit and win merits and better rebirths and karmic blessings of longevity, beauty, happiness and power. But none of these bring awakening, that is, true liberation.

In promoting good, Māra deviously knows that we will also be confronted with bad: they exist in common and contrast with each other. Religion defines good and fear; then, teach us to love good and hate bad. This is a love-hate loop of samsara. Māra just loves to keep us in the loop—that is samsara, cyclic life. If we mix metaphors, we may say that it is Māra who induces Sisyphus to imagine his rock-pushing is actually rewarding and enjoyable—just as a dung-beetle instinctively pushes its dung-ball.

Emperor Māra

Māra is like a **Chinese emperor** at the height of China's imperial supremacy. He is at the centre of the empire, the "realm" (*dheyya*). His personal effects upon us can be directly felt when we live in his capital: this is the sense-world (*kāma,loka*). He is our Overlord that are our sense-bases—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind—and their respective sense-objects and sense-consciousnesses: "the all" (*sabba*) of existence [1.2.1.2].

The emperor's power may not be so strong in the provinces (the form world), and even more so in the outer reaches of the borderlands (the formless world). But his influence can reach out to wherever there is land or living space, his realm. Just as the emperor is the "essence" of all that is on and in his lands, Māra, is the "essence" of sentient existence, the nature of worldly being, of worldliness itself.

Māra as jealous God

Theologically, Māra is a "jealous or loving all-powerful God" who wants to keep his realm, that is samsara, populated and permanent. A father-figure who wants to keep his family under his full fiat. Māra promises **eternal life** in three ways—sensual existence of sense-based joys, form-based ecstasy of the form realms, and formless peace of the formless realm. Although Māra's power is most direct and potent in the sense-world, his influence effectively reaches out to all existence—worldly and heavenly.

In our sense-world, Māra's power works over us when we think in terms of I and thou—the vocabulary of self-identity. Our physical senses collect and process external data, while the mind, by way of "mindfulness" or memory, gives them continuity (*santata*). Through our present experiences, we falsely correlate past experiences and future possibilities as defining our self-identity (*sakkāya*).⁶

⁶ See I: **The nature of identity**, [SD 19.1](#).

Māra as self

Once we identify a “self,” we begin to measure what is “not-self,” that is, the *other*: we think in terms of self and other. We measure self against others—this is called “conceit” (*māna*).⁷ What we measure we imagine to be pleasurable (worth having or worth being) and unpleasurable (to be rejected, even annihilated)—this is the nature of craving (*taṇha*).⁸

The true reality is that everything in this whole universe is impermanent—there is nothing that remains unchanging that we can really identify with. What is impermanent—by its nature of arising and passing away, and becoming other—is unsatisfactory because we expect or hope for something we can permanently relate to. What is impermanent and unsatisfactory is beyond our control—simply because there is nothing there to control by passing moments. Hence, the bottom line is that there is no abiding entity, no unchanging self, no immortal soul, no eternal essence—only passing phenomena.⁹

The Buddha and the arhats

Those who are unable or unwilling to see these 3 characteristics of existence are also those caught up by the activities and power of the body and mind—the 6 senses—and are thus completely under Māra’s power. Hence, we can see Māra as representing all of samsara itself, that is the “antithesis” of nirvana.¹⁰

If we fail to see this subtle but real difference and distinction between samsara and nirvana, we may end up seeing them as being the same—just as we may argue that the burning and the extinguishing of a fire refers to the “same” fire, which may be an interesting correlation or “synthesis,” but false conditionality. We may correlate them, but they do not condition one another. Nirvana is non-conditioned.

Only the Buddha and the arhats are awakened to **the 3 characteristics** of universal impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self, are liberated from Māra, who are free from existence itself.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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⁷ See **Me: The nature of conceit**, [SD 19.2a](#).

⁸ See **Mine: The nature of craving**, [SD 19.3](#).

⁹ On how impermanence is the basis of the meaning of life, see [SD 26.9](#) (2.2).

¹⁰ For a study on Māra, see **Māra**, SD 61.8.