

SD 61.12 Cha,phass'āyatana Sutta

The Discourse on the 6 Bases of Contact

S 4.17

(Māra) Āyatana Sutta The (Māra) Discourse on the Bases

Theme: Māra is what distracts us away from doing or being good

Translated by Piya Tan ©2011, 2024

1 Sutta summary

The (Māra) **Cha,phass'āyatana Sutta** (S 4.17) records how once while the Buddha is teaching the Dharma and the monks are intently listening to him, Māra, desiring to confuse the monks, appears not far from the Buddha and makes a terrifying sound, as if the earth itself is splitting. When the monks are distracted by this sound, the Buddha explains to them what it really is. The Buddha then addresses Māra and he at once disappears.

2 Māra as the 6 sense-bases¹

2.1 THE SUTTA VERSE S 480

2.1.1 All of “the world”

2.1.1.1 In **S 480**, the 6 sense-bases are identified as the “all” (*sabba*)—as taught in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23).² These sense-bases create and feed our existence. Hence, the sense-bases and their respective consciousnesses are said to be the “all.” “**The all**” (*sabba*) empowers Māra; they *are* Māra. The all—our 5 physical senses and the mind—are the things with which we create our world and sustain it.³

Māra feeds on *the all*, the activities of the sense-bases, which, in turn, feed the sense-bases of the unawakened. In dhyana, we transcend the body and its senses; hence, we rise beyond Māra’s power. However, only the awakened saint, the arhat, is completely free from Māra’s power.⁴

2.1.1.2 Wherever there is existence—with our notions and actions of *being, having* and *becoming*—Māra is there delighting in our “progress,” enticing us on with baits (*āmisā*) of gains, honours and praises (*lābha, sakkāra, siloka*).⁵

I take the word *kevalā* as a stand-alone and render it as “**everything else**” (*kevalā*), that is, as a synonym of *sabba* (“all”)—as in **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), SD 7.1—a blanket term for the sense-faculties, their objects, their consciousnesses, etc. This is said to be the “world,” as we have noted.

2.1.1.3 The Saṃyutta Commentary gives us 2 senses of *lok'āmisā*, which literally means “the carnal world,” or more broadly, “the worldly.” The Commentary gives 2 senses of *lok'āmisā*, as follows:

¹ These notes first appeared in SD 50.8 (2.3.2) and are slightly revised here.

² S 35.23 (SD 7.1).

³ On “the all” of the sense-bases, see **Sabba S** (S 35.23), SD 7.1.

⁴ The suttas—eg **Mahā,paribbāna S** (D 16,3), SD 9—often record that Māra still appears to the Buddha, and the arhats, too, to taunt or distract them, but always in vain. See also **Māra Tajjanīya S** (M 50), SD 36.4 (2.3) & **Māra**, SD 61.8.

⁵ See **Lābha, sakkāra Saṃyutta** (S 17/2:225-243) & **(Opamma) Nāga S** (S 20.9/2:268-270), SD 69.12.

(1) Figuratively (*pariyāyena*), **lok'āmisa** denotes the entire round of existence with its **3 planes** (the sense world, the form world and the formless world), that is, the objective sphere of attachment; “the food or bait of the world.”⁶

Verse **S 371d** of the (Deva,putta) Nānā,titthiyā Sutta (S 2.30), too, employs *āmisa* figuratively, that is, meaning a “bait.”⁷ In **the Bālīsikōpama Sutta** (S 35.189), however, the 6 sense-objects are compared to *baited hooks* rather than to the bait itself.⁸ However, the idea remains the same: they work to “bait” us and keep us “hooked.”

(2) Literally (*nippariyāyena*), **lok'āmisa** refers to the 4 requisites (food, clothing, shelter and health support), that is, the material bases for life. Such daily necessities may seem innocuous, but when a renunciant—indeed, any of us for that matter—uses or seeks them beyond their needs, or accumulates them like wealth, they open themselves up to greed, which is one of the avenues through which Māra gains access into their lives and gains a tight grasp of them. (SA 1:23,16-19)

2.1.1.4 The word “world” (*loka*) appears twice in **S 480***, that is, in lines cd. In **line c**, it is part of the compound, *lok'āmisa*, “the bait that is the world.” Here, “world” refers to the world of formations (*sāṅkhārā*), the world that we create with the 6 sense-objects through our 3 doors of karmic activity of body, speech and mind. This is our inner virtual world which we constantly project onto the outer realities.

The “world” in **line d** refers to the world of beings, including us humans, but we are not alone. All that have conscious existence (in a willful sense) somehow are victims of the formations. In the sense world, Māra has direct and constant access to us through our 6 senses-bases inciting us to be “creative,” that is, to keep working and playing with the sense-objects like cosmic Lego pieces.

Māra is less influential in the form world—these are *dhyanic* states—but no matter how long-lasting they are, they are still impermanent, so that the beings there are still part of samsara, Māra’s realm. Even the formless realms, from which Māra is virtually absent, are still part of samsara. They are still linked to Māra by the samsara “gene,” so to speak.⁹

2.2 THE SUTTA VERSE S 481

2.2.1 The arhat

S 481 is about **the arhat**, the fully awakened saint, liberated just like the Buddha himself. Because the arhat has destroyed all the unwholesome roots of greed, hate and delusion, there is no way now for Māra to take over or even influence his mind. This is because the arhat is neither *attracted* to nor *distracted* by any kind of sense-object. He sees them all as they truly are: *impermanent*, *unsatisfactory* and *non-self*.

Even as the arhat lives his last life, he is fully liberated from samsara. When he dies, he is not born again—he does not return to samsara, Māra’s realm. He is freed from Māra. The arhat has “entered” nirvana, meaning that there is no way for us to define or describe the arhat’s state, except perhaps indirectly or through metaphors.¹⁰

⁶ See S 371d; S 480; S 35.230/4:158 f as baited hooks.

⁷ S 371d*/2.30/1:67 (SD 86.11).

⁸ S 35.189/4:158 f (SD 91.14).

⁹ Note that **Māra Nimantanika S** (M 49) records Māra as gaining access to the brahma form world (SD 11.7).

¹⁰ On describing nirvana, see SD 50.1 (2).

2.2.2 Māra'dheyya

2.2.2.1 The Commentary explains *māra,dheyya*, “Māra’s realm” [S 481d] as the round of existence, that is, the 3 worlds (sense-world, form world, formless world), which is the place for Māra to stand [exist] (SA 1:18 f). Where Māra stands, Māra rules.¹¹ In the sense that we are dependent on them, our senses are Mara; we are dependent on our senses to make sense of things, create our own sense-based virtual world. It is a self-created, self-centred world. In this sense, our senses are Māra, and Māra is thus the world, our self-made world.

Māra,dheyya has a synonym, *maccu,dheyya*, “the realm of death,” which is more common, especially in the verses. The Commentaries on **Sn 358** and **Thī 10** explain this compound, thus: “Death is set here; hence, it is ‘the realms of death,’ *maccu,dheyya*. This context refers to the rounds in the 3 worlds [the sense, the form, and the formless worlds]” (SnA 1:351; ThīA 13).¹²

Although the term refers to samsara as a whole, it highlights Māra’s destructive power, not only in the sense that he *ends* everything for us, but in the sense that this is only a new beginning of the whole process, *ad infinitum*. He keeps us going, gone, and then coming back for more: we are caught in a rocky and rolling rut, where we seem to enjoy ourselves.

We tend to see the 3 realms as the domain of life; but with life there is also **death**. As Māra’s realm, the 3 worlds, that is, samsara, is said to be Māra’s realm of death. Its “beyond” or “far shore” is nirvana (SA 1:26,30-27,1).¹³ Hence, verse S 102 of **the Na Santi Sutta** (S 1.34) says:

“From death’s realm, a person does not reach | the state of no-more-returning.”

apunāgamanam | anāgantvā puriso maccu,dheyyā

(S 1.34/1:22), SD 42.6

“The state of no-more-returning” is nirvana, since on attaining nirvana we do not return to the world of life and death.

2.2.2.2 Under Māra’s powers, we become like **Sisyphus** of Greek mythology who has to push a big round boulder uphill, and when he reaches the hill-top—with some sense of achievement, or at least expectation—the rock rolls down again (the hill-top is not spacious or stable enough to hold the boulder). Sisyphus runs after the boulder, again with some sense of accomplishment. The rock stops rolling at the foot of the hill in some low-lying spot. Sisyphus pushes the rock uphill all over again—and the whole *cycle* keeps repeating. It keeps repeating because Sisyphus is driven by a sense of success by all his efforts. That’s how Māra’s power works on us.

To free oneself from Māra’s grasp, it helps to understand the true nature of **merit** (*puñña*)—it is only truly beneficial when it brings about conditions conducive for personal growth: mental cultivation and spiritual liberation. This means cultivating moral virtue, clearing the mind and seeking wisdom for self-awakening. All this is the basis for our aspiration to attain streamwinning in this life itself. In due course, when we become arhats, we are then truly free from Māra because we are beyond good and bad, “we have given up both merit and demerit” (*puñña,papa,pahīna*).¹⁴

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¹¹ *Māra,dheyyan’ti māraṣṣa ṭhāna,bhūtam te,bhūmaka,vaṭṭam* (SA 1:178). See also Comy on the word at **Māra Dhītu S** (S 4.25), SD 36.6: *Māra,dheyyan’ti te,bhūmaka,vaṭṭam* (SA 1:186; cf AA 3:18, DhA 4:69).

¹² *Maccu,dheyyan ti maccu ettha dhīyatī ti maccu,dheyyan* (ThīA 13), *te,bhūmika,vaṭṭass’etaṃ adhivacanam* (SnA 1:351,28).

¹³ See **S 16d** (S 1.9/1:4).

¹⁴ SD 2.10 (3.2.3.4). Cf kusalākusala-p,pahīna (Sn 715c) Sn 3.11, §37, comy on *kiccākicca-p,pahīna* (SD 49.18).

Cha,phass'āyatana Sutta

The Discourse on the Six Bases of Contact

S 4.17

1 Thus have I heard.

At one time, the Blessed One was staying in the hall of the pinnacled house¹⁵ in the great wood outside Vesālī. [113]

2 At that time, the Blessed One was instructing, inspiring, rousing and gladdening the monks¹⁶ with a Dharma talk¹⁷ concerning the 6 bases of contact.¹⁸

3 And those bhikkhus were listening to the Dharma, fully attentive, fully receptive, all ears, minding it,¹⁹ directing their whole mind²⁰ to it.²¹

4 Then it occurred to Mara the evil one:

“This recluse Gotama is *instructing, inspiring, rousing and gladdening the monks*²² with a Dharma talk concerning the 6 bases of contact.

And those bhikkhus were listening to the Dharma, fully attentive, fully receptive, all ears, minding it, directing their whole mind to it.

Let me approach the recluse Gotama in order to confound them.”

5 Then, Mara the evil one approached the Blessed One and, not far from him, made a loud noise, frightful and terrifying, as though the earth were splitting open.²³

6 Then one monk said to another:

“Bhikshu, bhikshu! It seems as though the earth is splitting open.”

7 When this was said, the Blessed One said to that monk:

“The earth is not splitting open, bhikshu. That is Mara the evil one, who has come here in order to confound you.”

¹⁵ “The hall of the pinnacled house,” or simply “the pinnacled house” (*kūṭ'āgāra,sālā*): see SD 45.2 (2).

¹⁶ Be *bhikkhūnaṃ*; Ce Ee Se *bhikkhu*.

¹⁷ On this stock phrase, “instructing ... a Dharma talk,” see (Māra) Patta S (S 4.16), SD 61.11 (1.2.2.1), & Pāriyeyya S (S 22.81,9 + n) SD 6.1.

¹⁸ “The 6 bases for contact” (*cha phass'āyatana*): the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. On these 6 bases for contact, see Dhātu Vibhaṅga S (M 140,7), SD 4.17; SD 57.34 (2.3.4).

¹⁹ Be *atthim katvā*; Ce Ee Se *aṭṭhi,katvā*.

²⁰ Be Ce *sabba,cetasā*; Ee Se *sabba,cetaso*.

²¹ *Te ca bhikkhū aṭṭhi,katvā* [Be *aṭṭhim katvā*] *manasi katvā sabba,cetaso samannāharitvā ohita,sotā dhammaṃ suṇanti*: M 65,32/1:445 (SD 56.2), 134,6/3:201 (SD 109.11); S 4.16/1:113 (SD 61.11), 8.6/1:189 (SD 58.7), 46.38/-5:95 (SD 41.10). DPI 37 *aṭṭhi katvā ... suṇāti*: “Making himself a seeker of meaning, he gives ears [sic] and listens to the Dhamma with full attention, directing his mind totally towards it.” On how this builds up the 5 faculties (*indriya*), see SD 58.2 (1.2.1.2).

²² Be *bhikkhūnaṃ*; Ce Ee Se *bhikkhu*.

²³ Be *undriyati*; Ce Ee1+2 Se *udriyati*; PED says it is a passive form from *ud + dṛṇoti*. See SED: dri > pass diryate. Comy: *ayaṃ mahā,paṭhavī paṭa,paṭa,saddaṃ kurumānā viya ahoṣi*, “This great earth seemed to be making a crackling sound” (SA 1:178,15 f). Subcomy: *Undriyati ti viparivattati*, “‘Is splitting open’ means ‘is turning over’” (SAṬ:Be 1:211,19). The word recurs at Samiddhi S (S 4.22/1:119,17 f). On the evolution of the Pali word, see Hinüber, “Remarks on the Critical Pali Dictionary (II),” in *Selected Papers*, pp152-155.

- 8 *rūpā saddā rasā²⁴ gandhā
phassā dhammā ca kevalā
etaṃ lok'āmisam ghoram
ettha loko vimucchito.* **S 480** Forms, sounds, tastes, smells,
touches and thoughts, and everything else.²⁵
This fearsome bait that is the world:²⁶
the world is infatuated here.
- 9 *etañ ca samatikkamma
sato buddhassa sāvako
māra,dheyyam atikkamma
ādicco'va virocatīti.* **S 481** But when he has gone beyond this,
the mindful disciple of the Buddha,
having crossed over Māra's realm,²⁷
shines radiant like the sun.
- 10 Then, Māra the evil one, thinking,
"The Blessed One knows me, the well gone one knows me!"
Sad and disheartened, he disappeared right there.²⁸

— evaṃ —

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²⁴ Se *gandhā rasā*. See S 477 n at **(Māra) Mānaso S** (S 4.15), SD 61.10.

²⁵ "And everything else" (*kevalā*) refers to their respective contacts, consciousnesses, feelings, perceptions, craving and so on. [2.1.1.2]

²⁶ "The bait that is the world" (*lok'āmisa*, lit, "the carnal world"). On its 2 senses [2.1.1.3].

²⁷ On *maradheyya* see (2.2.2.1).

²⁸ *Dukkhī dummano tatth'ev'antaradhāyi*. This is stock occurs 32 times in Saṃyutta in connection with Māra [SD 61.9 (3.1.2)].