

## The 6 kinds of existential struggles (2 of 3)

An excerpt from *SD 60.1f*

*Handbook of Meditation in Society: A psychopathology of Mindfulness* © Piya Tan, 2023c (forthcoming).

### 5.4.9.3 The asura struggle

In Buddhist psychom mythology—psychological ideas expressed through myths—we can speak of at least 4 kinds of asura or demonic struggle: (1) the power struggle over others, (2) the fear struggle of individuals, (3) the struggle with Māra, and (4) the supersweet mask.

(1) In early Buddhist mythology, **the asuras** were the “old gods” inhabiting Tāvātīmsa, who spent their time drinking divine liquor, being drunk most of the time. The “new gods” led by Sakra (Pāli, *sakka*) and his 33 companions, disgusted at the conduct of the asuras, literally threw them out from that heaven so that the asuras fell into the great ocean of our world. Since then, the asuras were inhabitants of the ocean depths—and recalling their eviction by the Sakra and his devas—have been at war with them.<sup>1</sup>

Hence, the asuras *psychologically* are depicted as being demons who are fiercely calculating, acquisitive, exploitative and narcissistic. This is a classic modern image of the inhuman entrepreneur, business boss or any person who loves power (especially a politician), male and female, to whom people are merely numbers, statistics and means of profit, gain and growth of the business, corporation, or power group.

This is the first and worst kind of subhuman existing amongst humans, often controlling us. Although we speak of a “struggle” here, it is really a consistent exploitation of humans, human resources and nature herself. The asura demons have no values: life is when we are of service to them; happiness is when they seem to forget or forego us; freedom is when they fail or seem to fail, even by their absence; truth is what they see as beneficial to them.

(2) On the individual level, the asura struggle refers to **demonic struggles** that often take the form of fears and worries that our problems are caused by demons, evil spirits or bad luck; or, feelings of being attacked or tormented by the malevolent spirits or jinxed by some ungratified ancestors (the dead). Such a struggle is common amongst the superstitious, whether they are religiously inclined or not. This group of asura strugglers include ethnic Buddhists, especially those who are conditioned to believe in local spirits and demons, in devas (often through Hindu influence and assimilation of Hinduism in ethnic Buddhism).

Amongst northern Buddhists, especially those who practise Vajrayana Buddhism, the struggle with demons, spirits and non-humans are even more sophisticated and common. Such beliefs are, in fact, more common with the ethnic Buddhists of Tibet (and Tibetan

---

<sup>1</sup> On the asura myth, see SD 57.10 (3.2.6).

Buddhism), Himalayan cultures, Mongolia, Siberia and northern Eurasia (especially the Finno-Ugric and Altaic peoples).<sup>2</sup>

(3) **The struggle with Māra.** The name Māra comes from the root √MR, “to die”; hence, Māra is the embodiment of death, in the sense that he evolved from Yama, the Vedic god of death and justice. However, in early Buddhism, Māra does not represent death, but rather in an almost cavalier rejection of death, not only affirms life—Māra wants us to stay on forever in samsara—but to throw ourselves abandonedly into the pleasures of life. He is more like a very nasty male version of the Greek goddess Hedone (whose Roman counterpart is Voluptas).<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the Devil or Satan of the God-religions who lives in Hell, Māra is a sense-world celestial being dwelling in *the highest heaven* of the sense universe<sup>4</sup> (that is, just below the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana brahma world).<sup>5</sup> Māra acts as the antagonist of the Buddha and his saint disciples, ever advocating enjoyment of sensual pleasures instead of renunciation and striving for awakening. Hence, a recurrent theme of the suttas is that of defeating Māra, “blinding” him and getting out of his reach by being mindful and getting into dhyana (*jhāna*).<sup>6</sup>

Māra often plays **the tempter**, trying to stop the adult Gotama<sup>7</sup> from renouncing the world,<sup>8</sup> discouraging the ascetic Gotama from going into self-mortification, but to live making merits.<sup>9</sup> Making merits (*puñña*) is good, but it keeps us in samsara; hence, in Māra’s power: it is the wholesome (*kusala*) practice of the 3 trainings [3.1.1.1] that frees us from samsara, that is, Māra’s realm.<sup>10</sup>

As the Bodhisattva Gotama prepares himself to go into deep meditation on the night of the awakening, Māra appears in his most violent and massive form, with his huge horde of demons and weaponry, terrifying even the gods themselves. Māra and his horde attack the Bodhisattva who touches the earth, calling Mother Earth to witness the Bodhisattva’s past moral perfections. Mother Earth rises from the ground in her massive form, wrings the

---

<sup>2</sup> See R M Torrance, *The Spiritual Quest: Transcendence in myth, religion and science*, Berkeley: Univ of Berkeley Press, 1994; O F Von Feigenblatt, *The Eurasian Shamanism: Num-Torum, Korean Buddhism and Shinto*, Chisinau (Moldova) & London” Lambert Academic Publishing, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> In classical mythology, Hedone (*Hēdonē*, literally “Pleasure”), the personified spirit (*daimona*) of pleasure and enjoyment, is the daughter of Eros/Cupid (embodiment of sensual pleasure) and Psychē (the soul), and the grand-daughter of Aphrodite/Venus (the goddess of love) and Ares/Mars (the god of war). Plato, *Philebus* 112b (tr Fowler), 4<sup>th</sup> cent BCE; Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* 2,23 (tr Rackham), 1<sup>st</sup> cent BCE; Statius, *Silvae* 1.3.8 (tr Mozley), 1<sup>st</sup> cent CE; Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 6.24 ff (tr Walsh), 2<sup>nd</sup> cent CE. See: <https://www.theoi.com/Daimon/Hedone.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Māra lives in the realm of the gods who lord over others’ creations (*nimmāna, ratī vasavattī*) with a lifespan of 16,000,000 cosmic years [SD 54.3a (2.2.1.1)]. He is sometimes called Vasavattī, hinting that he is the lord of that heaven! For a table of the early Buddhist cosmology, see SD 1.7 (App).

<sup>5</sup> **Brahma Nimantanika S** (M 49) relates Māra invading the 1<sup>st</sup>-dhyana brahmas (SD 11.7 (2.1.1)).

<sup>6</sup> Māra is blinded by dhyana, **Nivapa S** (M 25,12-20/1:159 f), SD 71.2; **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,34-43/1:173-175), SD 1.11.4.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, Māra does not bother the 7-year-old Gotama meditating in the 1<sup>st</sup> dhyana under the jambul tree at Suddhodana’s ploughing festival outside Kapilavatthu: **Mahā Saccaka S** (M 36,31), SD 49.4; SD 52.1 (5.2).

<sup>8</sup> Māra tries to stop Gotama from renouncing, SD 52.1 (9.1.2) Māra’s 1<sup>st</sup> appearance.

<sup>9</sup> Māra pleads the Bodhisattva to give up asceticism and make merits, **Padhāna S** (Sn 425-429), SD 51.11.

<sup>10</sup> See **Padhāna S** (Sn 430-449), SD 51.11; SD 52.1 (16.3).

waters from her long hair, raising a great deluge that washes Māra and his horde clean away. A beautiful allegory of good karma.<sup>11</sup>

As unawakened humans, Māra sees us all as easy meat with his huge, sophisticated bevy of religious figures (including modern monks and nuns) to teach us to master specific and private dogmas of great sectarian and ethnic teachers, studying Buddhist texts for title, status and gains, making merits and “transferring” merits to the dead—so that we keep reprising the roles of the dead burying the dead.

Intoxicated with wealth and status, we declare: we *don't need* to keep the precepts. When we see ourselves as being poor, disadvantaged or downtrodden, we plead: we just *can't* keep the precepts! *The suttas are too difficult! Why meditate when we can be more productive? Let's look for famous Buddhist speakers who teach us to live life and engage with society! The Dharma needs to be modernized; the Vinaya is outdated; renunciation can wait: we have many lives for that! Let us revise the Buddha!* This is just a hint of our struggle with Māra.<sup>12</sup>

(4) One common manifestation of the asura struggle is that of keeping up a charmingly friendly face and demeanour called **the supersweet mask**. This is often a strategy to solicit a favourable response from others, even attract charisma to oneself. The supersweet mask is usually worn by a person with a high status or position of power so that they are able to exude a seeming aura of friendliness and generosity.

Hence, a supersweet person would never find fault with us or even say anything disagreeable with us, and basically agree with whatever we say or request. It seems to work because we are convinced by this pretence. If anything should go wrong, the supersweet person would avoid discussing the matter or even acknowledge having agreed to anything. In this case, the supersweet would resort to the “silent treatment.”

The supersweet individual is usually one who knows that they are highly respected or deeply feared. With just a hint, they know they are able to mobilize their followers or devotees to blame or discipline a wayward person, or someone who appears to be a threat to that supersweet person.<sup>13</sup> Supersweet behaviour, as an unconscious defence, may be a trait of a narcissist. As a deliberate “Sun Tzu” strategy, it may be the actual cunning of a Machiavellian individual. [5.4.1]

#### 5.4.9.4 The animal struggle

The animal struggle is characterized by *ignorance, fear and routine*. There are only 2 types of animal struggles: (1) the chicken round and (2) the cattle round.

(1) **The chicken round**—which has been briefly described [5.4.5.4]—is not really a struggle: we simply get caught up in it as a conditioned reflex so that we know no other lifestyle. There is also a fear of those who are different, so that we tend to stay with our

---

<sup>11</sup> **Padhāna S** (Sn 442 f), SD 51.11; SD 52.1 (16.1.5.2).

<sup>12</sup> For a study of Māra, see SD 61.8.

<sup>13</sup> For such a case, see SD 60.1d (4.5.2.2).

own kind, that is, within the family, clan or tribe, birds of a feather, beasts of a fur. Our life is a humdrum routine in terms of time and place.

On account of such a routine life, almost every action or reaction is predictable. We simply repeat the same old ways and stay with them. This routine is the gathering of food for self and the family, a place to shelter self and the family, and some routine self-care in case of any sickness in the family. There is almost no place for reading, much less writing. In fact, in such a fixed routine, there is no place for learning at all, not to speak of spiritual growth, whatever that is.

There are however some special occasions when we do take a break from the animal rounds, that is, when there is a mating ritual or the caring of family-members. Even then there is always the routine even in running a family. The adults and those old enough to stand on their own feet would know what their personal routine would be. There is also no show of play or love: they are not part of the routine. To break the routine is to lose touch with others, which renders everything purposeless.

I'm only describing a real-life situation we often see in the poorer parts of society. In fact, in a capitalist society, we are very dependent on this "chicken-scratch" class to run our society smoothly. Ironically, most of these routineers are quite well off, but they have to work very hard. Some may resort to gambling or borrow money to get out of the routine life, but they may end up losing or owing money that they have to close down their routine business altogether and go into hiding.

(2) **The cattle round** is a routine life like that of the chicken rounders, but the cattle rounders are generally better off, even very much wealthier (cattle are bigger than chicken). Hence, their routine is simply because they can afford it. A few, however, do try to imagine something better they can do with their wealth for the benefit of others. Despite their routine and predictability, they do go out of their rounds for the benefit of meeting those with power, class or religion, hoping that they are able to be uplifted by such an association. They avoid smaller creatures for the simple reason that they are smaller. However, caught in a routine life, they are not used to the idea of learning anything new, except just for the pleasure of the moment, like elephants rolling in the mud-pool or dusty dirt.

We see a lot of the cattle rounders in traditional and ethnic religions. Like cattle, they are used to taking the same regular path (*go,cara*) to their religious pasture and back again to their karmic pen like clockwork. Their religion is not about personal growth but simply of maintaining class and status quo. They see the religious teachers and priests as their proxies in faith and spiritual butlers. The teachers and priests teach them, tell them what to do and not to do, pray for them, bless them, negotiate with the dead for them; butler to their religious needs. The closest to doing something for themselves is perhaps meditation. But even this is ritually guided by their leader. The cattle rounder only needs to piously pay for this routine butlering.

Often enough, the cattle rounders struggle with doubt and guilt feeling confused about new or difficult teachings, or do not understand (much less practise) an ancient teaching, simply because they do not know what the sacred texts actually teach, or what the rituals

actually are for or how they work, or even if they are necessary at all, or that they may be a hindrance to cultivation. They depend on their preachers and priests to console them and negotiate their wellbeing with the higher powers they believe in.

One can only feel, indeed, must feel, compassion for the animal strugglers, caught in such a routine, struggling to make ends meet—like a snake biting its own tail, feeling the pain of it all, and wondering why and where the pain comes from. For the chicken rounder, *their end is their means*; for the cattle rounder, *their means is their end*. Clearly suffering arises from ignorance.

R827 Inspiration 480

TAN Beng Sin ©2023