

Who or what is Māra?

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1 Symbolism, mythology, psychology of evil in early Buddhism

1.0.1 Summary

Māra is the Buddhist “devil,” but is actually a god living in the highest of the sense-world heavens. The suttas often depict Māra as the enemy of the Buddha, constantly tries to prevent or disrupt his teaching in order to prevent beings reaching nirvana. He often appears to distract the Buddha’s disciples, especially the nuns, from their meditation, and works to distract followers and others (even the gods) from listening to the Buddha or offering him alms.

Throughout the Buddha’s life, beginning from his renunciation until his passing away, Māra lurks around the Buddha discouraging him from asserting himself in his quest for awakening, not to teach the Dharma, and to pass away at once into nirvana. However, he is not seen as the Buddha’s “opposite,” but one who is everything that awakening and nirvana are not: this moral, psychological and teleological opposition makes Māra one of the most interesting figures in religion.

1.0.2 Significance of the study of Māra

1.0.2.1 Early Buddhism denies that there is a deity who is the creator of the world or is responsible for its state or the fortunes of its creatures. Hence, it also rejects the existence of cosmic or metaphysical evil and sin like that found in theistic religions and belief. It also unequivocally rejects the existence of an abiding self (attā; Skt ātman), and hence, in a sense, of moral evil as conceived in theistic thinking and beliefs.

In a modern philosophical sense, however, evil, according to early Buddhism, exists and prevails in the guise of suffering (dukkha), and which plays a key role in Buddhist morality, psychology and eschatology. Suffering is an inevitable part of life due to the illusory belief that we have an abiding self or eternal soul. Once we overcome this belief, suffering will also cease and we awaken to spiritual freedom, that is, a full and clear understanding of reality and freedom from rebirth.

1.0.2.2 In the early Buddhist texts, the abiding self or eternal soul are unequivocally denied. On occasions, the Buddha would be silent on whether the self or soul exists or does not. This silence reflects the inexpressibility or difficulty of explaining nonself in conventional language, that assumes some abiding form (words) and essence (meanings). Hence, “what we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence.” (T. 7)

Post-Buddha Buddhist writers adopted this “silence,” in a way, to reconcile the notion of some kind of “state” continuing through time so that we can express ideas and make sense of them. The best known philosophical development here is perhaps Nāgasena’s famous metaphor of the flame in the Milinda,pañhā. Instead of saying that the self or soul pervades our life or survives death, Nāgasena asserts that what we think of as a “self” is like the flame that passes from one candle to another.

1.0.2.3 Every religion has their “resident evil”: it is Satan (and other forms of this name) in the theistic religions, and there is Māra in early Buddhism. Satan is certainly unique to theistic religions since he is the diametric opposite of God or his form amongst humans. In other words, it would not make any sense to apply such an idea to non-believers.

The bottom line in this essay is that (unlike Satan or evil as conceived in other religions) Māra is our own mind, or to be exact, he is our 5 aggregates (khandha) form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness [5]. Since all humans—indeed all sentient beings—have consciousness (a synecdoche for the 5 aggregates), we must conclude that the morality and mythology of Māra is that of everyman.

The idea here is not that we are by nature “evil” or even “bad” (though we tend to commit more of it than what is good and wholesome) [2.1.2.3]; but that our ignorance of true reality keeps us keep fooling us and keep making us foolish and feeble even before our own God and powerful beings, especially before our own God and powerful beings. Knowing Māra makes us true to our self and yet be selfless, and free beyond even spacious radiant heaven.

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