

Māra in the Dhaniya Sutta

Excerpt from *SD 61a: Māra, A Buddhist mythology of evil and embodiment of badness* by TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) © 2023.

2.5.1.2 The Dhaniya Sutta (Sn 1.2 = Sn 18-34) is a beautiful pastoral verse-dialogue between the Buddha and the herdsman Dhaniya. While Dhaniya sings of his wealth and contentment, the Buddha answers in counterpoint regarding a higher spiritual happiness. The opening verses (Sn 18 f) run thus (to be read downwards for each quatrain):

I've boiled the rice, I've milked the cows,
(thus said **Dhaniya** the herdsman,)
with my family I dwell on Mahī's¹ bank.
The hut is thatched, the fire is fed—
rain, therefore, rain if you wish! (Sn 18)

Without anger am I, barrenness² gone,
(thus said **the Blessed One**,)
Uncovered is the hut,³ the fire's quenched⁴—
rain, therefore, rain if you wish! (Sn 19)

Near the close of the ballad (Sn 33), Māra intervenes with sly remark. The Buddha, recognizing Māra, gives his own retort to Māra (Sn 34), thus (to be read downwards for each quatrain):

One with children⁵ delights in children,
(thus said **Māra** the evil one,)
thus, the herdsman truly delights in cattle.
For, acquisitions⁶ are a delight to a person;
one without acquisition delights not. (Sn 33)⁷

One with children grieves over children,
(thus said **the Blessed One**,)
the herdsman truly grieves over cattle.
For, acquisitions are grief for a person—
but one without acquisitions grieves not. (Sn 34)

¹ The Mahī, the 2nd largest river in Rajasthan, W India, rises in Madhya Pradesh and, after flowing through the Vagad region of Rajasthan, enters Gujarat and flows into the Arabian Sea: see SD 50.20 (2.2).

² On (mental) barrenness (*khila*), see (1.1.1; 3.1).

³ "Uncovered is the hut": see SD 50.20 comy 1-2 (4).

⁴ "The fire's quenched": see SD 50.20 comy 1-2 (6).

⁵ "Children," *puttā*, usu tr as "sons," but here refers to both sons and daughters (SnA 2:44,11).

⁶ On *upadhi*, see SD 50.20 (1.1.1; 3.2).

⁷ Sn 33-34 (SnA 44; cf J 1:231 f) recur in (**Devatā**) **Nandati S** (S 1.12 = S 22*-23*), SD 54.3b, the 1st verse spoken by a devata, and then the Buddha's response; (**Māra**) **Nandana S** (S 4.8 = S 461*-462*), SD 54.3a, the 1st verse spoken by Māra, followed by the Buddha's response; Mvst 3.417 + 418, the same. On Sn 33-34, see SD 50.20 comy 16-17, also (1.2.1.4).

2.5.1.3 Māra is here promoting the “herd” instinct: living for the sake of progeny and the means for proliferating our seeds and humanity, and ultimately samsara. Women who are obedient work hard for the family and are the means of populating the world. When Dhaniya proudly claims, “My wife is obedient,” the Buddha counters with “**My mind is obedient**” and yet free. When Dhaniya says, “**No evil is found in me,**” the Buddha, too, knows no evil, even as a young man living 29 years of luxurious home life: when he was surrounded by lust and other defilements but he did not commit any unwholesome act.

Thereafter for 7 years—6 years of self-mortification and the 1st year of the ministry—Māra follows the Buddha, thinking: “Perhaps I will see some evil conduct on his part, even as much as a fraction of a hair.” Not seeing any, disillusioned, he recites this verse, recorded in **the Padhāna Sutta** (Sn 3.2):

“For 7 years I followed the Blessed One, [trailing him] step by step, but I have not found any opening in the awakened one, who is mindful.” (Sn 446)

Also, after the Buddha’s awakening, the brahmin youth Uttara follows him for 7 months, observing his conduct, as recorded in **the Brahm’āyu Sutta** (M 91/2:137-140). Not finding any fault, he concludes: “The Blessed One is of purified conduct.” For the Buddha has 4 things that he does not need to hide, that is, his *bodily conduct, verbal conduct, mental conduct* and *livelihood* (A 7.58/4:82).

2.5.1.4 The Dhaniya Sutta commentary tells us that Māra, having seen both Dhaniya and his wife paying homage to the Buddha and requesting the going forth, thinks:

“They wish to escape from my domain. Let me create an obstacle to them.” He goes to them and recites the verse showing the excellence of the household life [2.5.1.3]. Having spoken thus about children and cattle being a cause of happiness], he now gives the reason proving this point, saying:

“**For acquisitions are a person’s delight**” (*upadīhi narassa nandanā*). Now there are 4 kinds of acquisitions: as sensual pleasures (*kāmūpadhi*), as the aggregates (*khandhūpadhi*), as defilements (*kilesūpadhi*), and as volitional activities (*abhisāṅkhārūpadhi*). For sensual pleasures are called “acquisitions” (*upadhi*) in the sense that pleasure is acquired (*upadhīyati*) in them, because they are the basis for the pleasure spoken about, thus: “Whatever pleasure and joy arise dependent on the 5 cords of sensual pleasure are called the gratification in sensual pleasures,” as stated in **the Mahā Dukkha-k,khandha Sutta** (M 13/1:85,28).

The aggregates, too, are the bases for suffering rooted in the aggregates; defilements, the bases for the suffering in the plane of misery; and volitional activities, the bases for the suffering of existence. But here (in this passage) “acquisitions as sensual pleasures” is intended. This is twofold, by way of beings and conditioned things.⁸ Having said, “in sons, in

⁸ *So satta,saṅkhāra,vasena*. This is a commentarial dichotomy of “beings” and “conditioned things,” towards which we may cling. “Conditioned things” refer to the constituent elements of a being (the 5 aggregates, the 4 elements) as distinct from the being conceived a human or not, male or female, the being as a name. status,

cattle,” showing that the chief of these is those bound up with beings, Māra states the reason thus:

“For acquisitions are a person’s delight.” The meaning is: “Because these acquisitions consisting in sensual pleasures are a person’s delight—since they delight them by bringing them rapture and joy—therefore it should be understood that one who has children delights because of children; so, too, one who has cattle delights because of cattle. And you have children and cattle. Therefore, delight in them; don’t wish for the going-forth. A monk does not have these acquisitions, and in such a case, though you wish for the end of suffering, you will be miserable.”

Māra now gives another reason trying to prove his point, saying: **without acquisitions one does not delight**. This is its meaning: “One who does not have these acquisitions, being separated from one’s dear relatives or destitute of enjoyments and commodities, does not delight. Therefore, if you give up these acquisitions, as a monk, you will be miserable.”

2.5.1.5 Sn 34 is spoken by the Buddha, having understood, “This is Māra the evil one, who has come to obstruct them [Dhaniya and his wife].” The Buddha, just as if he were dropping one fruit on top of another, turned the verse around, refuting Māra’s assertion with the very same simile brought forth by Māra. Showing, “**Acquisitions are the basis of suffering**,” he says: “**One who has children sorrows because of children.**”

The meaning of the words here is clear; this is the import: “Evil one, do not say: ‘One who has children delights because of children.’ For it is an inviolable law that there must be parting and separation from everything dear and beloved, and when people are *separated* from those who are dear and beloved—from children and wife, from cattle, horses, mares, bullion, gold, and so forth—their hearts are pierced by the dart of grief and they become deranged and even go mad. They experience deadly suffering, even death.

Therefore, we should note thus: **one who has children sorrows because of children**. And as one with children sorrows because of children, **one who has cattle likewise sorrows because of cattle**. Why is that? **For acquisitions are a person’s sorrow**. And since acquisitions are a person’s sorrow, it therefore follows that **without acquisitions one does not sorrow**.

One without acquisitions, who has abandoned the tie of acquisitions, is content with a robe to cover his body and almsfood to fill his belly. Wherever he goes, he goes, having taken these along. Just like a bird flying only with its wings as its burden. He understands: ‘There is no more coming back to any state of being.’⁹ With the destruction of all sorrow in

and so on, apprehended as a unit or object; or to inanimate objects, such as wealth and other material possessions.

⁹ SnA 45,32-46,1: from *so santuṭṭho hoti kāya,parihārikena cīvarena to nāparam itthattāyā ti pajānāti* contains the “sequential training,” ie, the samādhi+paññā,sikkhā pericope occurring in full (over 2 pages) in **Kandaraka S** (M 51,15-27/1:346-348), SD 32.9; **Deva,daha S** (M 101,33-45/2:226 f), SD 18.4; and (**Catukka**) **Taṅhā S** (A 4.198/2:209,34-211,22), SD 56.7; Pug 4,24/58,19-61,7. It occurs elsewhere in extended or modified forms.

this way, ‘one without acquisitions does not sorrow.’” Thus the Blessed One concludes the teaching with its culmination in arhathood.

Or alternatively: “One without acquisitions, [that is,] one without defilements, does not sorrow. For as long as there are defilements, all acquisitions are the roots of sorrow [fruit in sorrow].¹⁰ But with the abandoning of defilements, there is no sorrow.” In this way, too, he concludes the teaching with its culmination in arhathood.

At the conclusion of the teaching both Dhaniya and his wife go forth. The Blessed One returns to Jeta’s grove through the sky. Having gone forth, they realize arhathood. In the place where they had lived, their family and cowhands built a monastery, and even in the times of the Commentary it is known as “the Cowherd Family’s Monastery.”¹¹

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¹⁰ Two possible readings (SnA 1:146): Be *sabbe upadhayo soka-p,phalā va honti*, “all acquisitions have sorrow as fruit”; Ce Ee Se *sabbe upadhayo soka,mūlā vā honti*, “all acquisitions are the roots of sorrow.” See Sn 34 @ **Dhaniya S** (SD 50.20).

¹¹ Be Se *go,pālaka,vihāro*; Ce Ee *go,kulaṅka,vihāro*.