

Māra as Buddhist mythology

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

1.2.1 The power of mythology

1.2.1.1 A **myth** is usually a story from ancient times, especially one that is told to describe the early history of a people or to explain a significant event, state, or psychological tendency. **Mythology** can thus mean:

- (1) ideas or facts that many people believe to be true but that do not exist or are actually false;
- (2) states or deeds of gods or beings conceived as divine or having some extraordinary powers or similar attributes;
- (3) ancient myths in general or of a particular culture, religion, etc;
- (4) symbolic meaning(s) of persons, situations or teachings, especially when they depict or represent truth or reality—especially the moral, psychological and human aspects—in a bigger or deeper way than in real life, that is, in dramatic fashion (such as in sacred texts, literature and stories).

These basic usages are to be distinguished from the broad term “mythical” (or less frequently, “mythic”), which connotes “arbitrarily invented, imaginary stories, or personal truths.” Psychologically, a myth, whether religious, political, literary or imagined, is often rooted in some historical event reinterpreted to give an overarching significance for society, the community or a following.

1.2.1.2 The Māra “**myth**” itself may not be real (like stories of heavenly gods) in the historical sense. The stories and actions of the gods tend to follow a certain pattern or symbolize the nature of human conduct and true reality. The gods then are like ancient heroes but whose conduct and existence represent a timeless reality that we see in our lives and the pattern of history.

Mythology, through its stories, legends and myths points to our innermost thoughts and feelings, as well as the motivations behind our actions. In this way, mythology is a form of ancient psychology, offering insights into the human mind and the way it functions. Mythology also explains our emotions and conduct as a personal being and as social and cultural realities, and how they are interdependent.

Hence, the actions and qualities of these gods and of Māra are real enough in the sense that human are capable of committing them. We can, for example, reflect on the implications of the assault of Māra and his 10 armies on the Bodhisattva just before the great awakening and the palpable disaster of the 2 atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Māra thus warns us of the evil that we are capable of doing and often do them, with real and devastating effects.

1.2.1.3 On the other hands, we also have stories of the higher gods who exist by virtue of this “divine emotions” (*brahma, vihāra*), that is, *love, compassion, gladness* and

equanimity. These are qualities that we can cultivate that bring upon us those divine states of love, compassion, gladness and equanimity. In fact, these are states that ward off Māra.¹

This is, in fact, the case with the gods of **the form world** (*rūpa loka*), that is, those who exist independent of much of our sense-based physical body, and see, hear, smell, taste and feel directly with their minds, and habitually enjoy the bliss of dhyana (*jhāna*).²

Technically, only the gods of the sense worlds (*rūpa loka*) are called devas (*deva*, “radiant or playful ones”), while those of the suprasensual heavens are called brahmas (*brahma*, “perfect, divine”). The brahmas are so called because they are endowed with the “divine abodes” (*brahma, vihāra*) of lovingkindness, compassion, gladness, and equanimity (*mettā, karuṇā, muditā, upekkhā*).

1.2.1.4 Māra is said to inhabit *the highest heaven of the sense world*, that is, **Paranim-mita, vasavattī**, “those who lord over the creation of others.”³ In fact, he is said to be called **Vasavattī**, lord of that heaven,⁴ or bears the same name (perhaps to show his sway over all the sense-world beings) (MA 1:33 f). Thus, it is said that “Māra is the almighty supreme lord of the 6 sense realms” (*māro mahānubhāvo cha, kāmāvacar’issaro vasavattī*, MA 2:201).⁵

Hence, those living in the sense world are said to be “under Māra’s sway” (*māra, dheyya*), and that the whole of the sense world is his realm or kingdom.⁶ These beings are thus under the “fetter of death” (*māra, bandhana*).⁷ This “fetter” is the cost of life—to live is to die; to die is to be reborn and live again in that fettered cycle; this is samsara (*samsāra*). “Those caught in the flow of samsara are said to be in Māra’s sway” (*māra, dheyya, saṅkhātāṃ saṃsāraṃ anugate*, AA 4:223). [1.1.1.2]

Considering the fact that even the high gods, those in the form world and the formless world, despite their astronomically long lifespans, will still die: they, too, are under the sway of Māra, even though Māra is not present in those worlds. In a real sense, Māra is what gives them life. Māra *is* life itself!

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¹ So long as we cultivate the divine abodes on a dhyana level, Māra is blinded by us. Moreover, these divine states, when properly developed, also facilitate other wholesome qualities like moral virtue, mental concentration and insight wisdom.

² See **Dhyana**, SD 8.4.

³ On its location and details, see SD 1.7 App; SD 57.10 (2.2). See also **Viññāṇa-ṭṭhiti**, SD 23.14.

⁴ **Kevaḍḍha S** (D 11,78/1:219), SD 1.7; **Puñña, kiriya, vatthu S** (A 8.36,10.2/4:243), SD 22.17.

⁵ SAṬ def *vasavatti* in terms of Māra’s function [1.2.2.1].

⁶ **Akkhaṇa S** (A 8.29/4:228), SD 104.9; Sn 764; Dh 34 (= *kilesa, vaṭṭa*, “the rounds of defilements,” DhA 1:289).

⁷ Dh 37, 276, 350 (= *te, bhūmaka, vaṭṭa, saṅkhātāṃ* DhA 4:69).