

Dealing with Māra today: the Mangala Sutta

An excerpt from Māra: The Buddhist mythology of evil and embodiment of badness (SD 61a, previously SD 61.8) © Piya Tan 2024.

2.6.1 The nature of *maṅgala*

2.6.1.1 The importance of this Maṅgala Sutta is attested by the prefix “Mahā” (great) affixed to it—the Mahā Maṅgala Sutta—and that it is preserved in 2 early Buddhist texts: the Sutta Nipāta (Sn 2.4) and the Khuddaka, Pāṭha (the 1st book of the Khuddaka Nikāya) (Khp 5). Both versions of the Sutta are commented in the same Param’attha, jotikā 2.¹ The Maṅgala Sutta is fully translated and commented on in the traditional way in **SD 67**. Here we will reflect on the 38 blessings in our contemporary living as a tool against the subtle deceptions of Māra.

The Commentaries explain *maṅgala* as popularly believed to be “auspicious” names, visions and objects; in other words, they are external or palpable things. But then no one could agree on what actually makes something *auspicious*. During the Buddha’s times, it is said, “many devas and humans, seeking after the good” want to know what *maṅgala* is. They have gathered together around the Buddha (the wisest being alive) to have their question answered.

The Commentaries present us a futuristic scenario—like in the Star Trek, Stars Wars or Star Gate TV series and movies—where the devas (“aliens”) of the “ten-thousand world-system” (“the known universe”) have gathered on earth (where the Buddha is). **Dhammapāla** compiled the Maṅgala Sutta commentary² between 450-600 CE was able to give this literary exegesis with a modern appeal impressing on us that this question on “what constitutes good fortune” is of universal, indeed, galactic, significance!

His mythical language is also familiar to later Western religionists, echoing similar ideas. He writes that so numerous were the devas assembled that up to 80,000 of them have “assembled in the space of a horse-hair’s tip” (*sannipatvā eka, vāl’agga, koṭi, okāsa, matte*) (KhpA 124,4-7). We must imagine that the devas were very tiny, but his language is metaphorical. These devas are invisible and thus need very little space to be present (perhaps like dust specks or radio waves or internet signals).³

2.6.1.2 If we see the Buddha as teaching and encouraging us to cultivate the straight and level path to **nirvana**, then Māra directly counters the Buddha’s ideas and ideals regarding the spiritual life of the path enticing or inducing us to keep to the meandering and undulating path of worldly pleasures and being busy celebrating *the past* and dreaming *the*

¹ Since Maṅgala S occurs as **Khp 5** (in Khuddaka, pāṭha, whose comy is Param’attha, jotikā 1 = KhpA) and as **Sn 2.4** (in Sutta, nipāta, whose comy is Param’attha, jotikā 2 = SnA), only KhpA, which SnA (Ee) incl only the first few sentences of the Sutta comy, and refer to KhpA (Ee).

² Perhaps working on materials available to Buddhaghosa probably a generation before him. Norman, *Pāli Literature*, Wiesbaden, 1983b:135 f; *Princeton Dict of Buddhism* 2014 sv aṭṭhakatha.

³ Used theologically by the 17th cent Protestants to mock mediaeval scholastics such as Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas. Prob an Early Modern invention to discredit the scholastics (W Van Asselt, *Intro to Reformed Scholasticism*, 2011:65. “Scornful description of a tedious concern with irrelevant details; an allusion to religious controversies in the Middle Ages. In fact, the medieval argument was over how many angels could stand on the point of a pin.” (Hirsch, Kett & Trefil (edd), *The New Dict of Cultural Literacy* 3rd ed 2002:70).

future. Clearly Māra’s way will engage us in more interesting and distracting ways than our desire and effort to follow the spiritual path.

The Mahā Maṅgala Sutta (Sn 2.4/*269/47)⁴ is a very practical skillful means taught by the Buddha to engage us fully as the laity where all our worldly activities—with their **blessings** (*maṅgala*) of joys and rewards—will occupy us and yet prepare us fruitfully and effectively for the spiritual life, whether we choose the lay path or the monastic path. The world then, because of its very nature, makes it necessary and urgent that we live a spiritual life as much as possible: it’s like using what are at our disposal for our benefit and for creating a network of benefits, indeed, a living network of extended hearts and minds.

It is well known that the “blessings” total 38. We can further group them sequentially in terms of the 3 trainings as:

(1) moral training	Sn 259-263	blessings 1-17,	[2.6.2]
(2) mind training	Sn 264-266	blessings 18-30,	[2.6.3]
(3) wisdom training	Sn 267-268	blessings 31-38.	[2.6.4]

Moral training comprises **Sn 259-263**, of which the first 3 verses (Sn 259–261 lists the ideal foundations for the spiritually good life; Sn 262-263 gives the different aspects of a morally virtuous life not only exemplary for ancient Indian society, but especially so for us today. Sn 264 summarizes the moral life with mention of the 5th precept (against intoxication), which aims at keeping us mindful and aware for the next stage, that of mind training.

Mind training comprises **Sn 264-266** relating to the cultivation of “mental virtues,” qualities that strengthen the mind for the cultivation of liberating wisdom by way of the Buddha’s teachings. Hence, we see Sn 267 as greater diligence in mindfulness and meditation.

Wisdom training comprises **Sn 267-268**, beginning with teachings that prepare the mind for the vision of true reality, ending in nirvana. Sn 268 describes the arhat’s liberated mind, who lives in the world happily, fault-free and safe from evil and worldliness. The final verse, Sn 269, highlights the spiritual victory and security that the “blessings” bring us as universal awakening.

The Buddha gave this teaching as a special training for the laity. It is helpful for us at the start not to see this training as separate from our daily lives—*our daily life is our spiritual training*: this is the only way to reach the path of awakening. Meantime, they bring blessings and happiness here and hereafter, especially a life that conduces to Dharma practice and attainment.

⁴ Sn 2.4/*258-*269/47 (SD 101.5). This sutta reference is useful once we learn how it works. “Sn” = Sutta Ni-pāta, “*260” = the star (asterisk) means it is a “verse number”; the last number, means “page 47.”

Sn 259-260

The Buddha gives his Maṅgala Sutta teachings in verse⁵ (like singing a song).⁶ They are listed below in Pali with their translations, followed by a brief practical explanation. The verses are numbered (within brackets) in sequence, followed by **the Sn number** in bold. Each of the 38 blessings will be numbered in *italics* accordingly on the far right.

In this first section, we go in quest of the blessings of **moral virtue** (*sīla*)—how we live, work, act, speak, and communicate—as “normal” humans. *Normal* here means that we habitually keep to a healthy standard, model or pattern of conduct that makes us **human** and embraces others in the same way. Such acts are blessings when we begin by keeping our bodily acts and speech *wholesome*; we are then out of Māra’s reach, by ensuring that our intentions are wholesome, too.

2.6.2.1 Maṅgala 1-3

(1) Sn 259 <i>āsevanā ca bālānaṃ</i>	1
<i>paṇḍitānañ ca sevanā</i>	2
<i>pūjā ca pūjāniyānaṃ</i> ⁷ —	3
<i>etam maṅgalam uttamam</i>	

not associating with the foolish,
and associating with the wise
and honouring those worthy of honour—
this is supreme blessing.

1 Not associating with the foolish

Māra loves fooling us, knowing that we enjoy being fooled: most of us love magic shows and we love surprises when they do not harm us in any way. Yet the harm is *pernicious*: we do not know that the “magic” is working on us: we enjoy being fooled. There are occasions when we do know who are making fools of us. Perhaps we know who the tricksters are but we are unable or undaring to deal with them. It’s the situation that such people create for us that make fools of us. These situations are the work of Māra, and these are the real “fools”—the trickster—that we should avoid.

As a rule, people who fool us tend to be toxic people. Very often they are people we know, even those close to us, or those who play significant roles in our lives or group. Lacking wisdom and compassion, they impose their authority on us through their status, power, title or simply arrogance. These are the people we have simply to avoid, even when or especially when they are negatively influencing many others to follow them.

The Khagga,visāṇa Sutta (the discourse on the rhinoceros) (Sn 1.3/*35-*75) are the teachings of various pratyeka-buddhas (buddhas who arise alone at a time when people are

⁵ The verses are in śloka (P *siloka*), quatrains with each line (*pāda*) of 8 syllables. In a regular śloka, in each line, the 6th, 7th and 14th syllables must be long (*dīgha*), and the 5th, 13th and 15th must be short (*rassa*). The other syllables may be long or short. There are often irregular forms. See A K Warder, *Pali Metr*, London: PTS, 1967.

⁶ Śloka poems like the Maṅgala S are often sung in Theravāda temples by the laity, such as during Sunday pujas. Monastics do not sing them since it is again the Vinaya to do so (Pāc 10/V 2:267,29 f).

⁷ *Khṇ pujaneyyānaṃ*.

not ready to hear the Dharma), advising renunciants to avoid society and socializing if they are keen on the spiritual life. This verse from the Sutta is worth even for the laity to reflect on in this connection:

One is not hostile in the 4 quarters
one is contented with whatever comes one's way.
One faces dangers without fear,
one wanders alone like a rhinoceros. (Sn 42)⁸

Wherever we are we associate with others with joy and wisdom, working together for our spiritual progress, even when faced with difficulties. However, there may come a time when the situation may be very negative and Māra's powers are dominant. Then, it is better for us to be alone like a rhinoceros—perhaps we may meet other happy rhinoceroses.

2 Associating with the wise

An effective way to avoid Māra's tricks is to learn truth and good from the wise. They are usually experienced teachers but they may be anyone whose words and examples teach us self-reliance and fellowship inspiring good in others. The rule of thumb about being "wise" is that it harms neither ourself nor others nor the environment. Thus we can say that everything is teaching us when we are willing and ready to learn: this is called the Rāhula strategy.⁹

Māra is just the opposite of this: our pride prevents us from learning, especially from our own mistakes. This is the kind of learning from seeing clearly the nature of causes and effects, how good draws good, evil spawns evil, beginning with the way we think, and when we let others think for us. It's simply letting Māra run our lives.

3 Honouring those worthy of honour

Māra often works to make us feel important, and to feel hurt when others do not give us a pat on our back. The reality is that everyone is worthy of honour. When we sincerely honour or respect others with kindness, we are likely to receive the same in return. We are unlikely to remember being cold or nasty to a person, but that person is likely to remember us for it, like chicken returning to roost. In many cases, this honouring is simply our gratitude towards someone who has done much good for us, and to reciprocate their kindness when the time is right.

2.6.2.2 Maṅgala 4-6

(2) Sn 260	<i>paṭirūpa, desa, vāso ca</i>	4
	<i>pubbe ca kata, puññatā</i>	5
	<i>atta, sammā, paṇidhi ca—</i>	6
	<i>etam maṅgalam uttamam</i>	

⁸ Also at Ap 2.16/9; Mvst 3:417.

⁹ Comys tell us that young Rāhula (the Buddha's own son), rising early every morning, takes a handful of sand in his hand, and aspires, "May I today receive just as much advice from the Buddha, and my preceptor and teachers!" (<A 3:134; AA 2:258). On account of such diligence, the Buddha declares him as the foremost amongst those monks **desirous of training** (*sikkhā, kāmānaṃ*) (A 1:24); SD 3.10 (1.0); SD 3.11 (1).

living in a suitable place,
and having done good in the past,
and setting oneself on the right path—
this is supreme blessing.

4 Living in a suitable place

Māra loves crowds and crowdedness. The crowd often owns us; crowdedness and clutter bury us and sap our energy. Where we live often shapes us even as we work to shape and secure our habitat like the shoes we wear and walk in. But more often than not, our personality and emotions are affected or shaped by the place we live in or frequent. When the environment is peaceful, healthy and happy, we feel it, too. We may not always have the fortune of living in such a place; often we have to make do with our living quarters. Yet we can and must learn to spread an aura of lovingkindness wherever we are. That way we breathe into our space and brightens it with love even when the world is cold around us. Then, the time comes when we know we must move on just as the sun moves with time.

5 Having done good [merit] in the past

Māra often distracts us with petty and wasteful habits, often through laziness, pettiness, foolishness. It's like when a fishing line is stuck in some heavy debris or solid object, and we think we've caught a whopper.

Merit (*puñña*) and good (*kusala*) are actions that are free from greed, hatred and delusion, and are rooted in charity, love and wisdom. "Merit" refers to when we act for our own benefit; but "good" refers to benefit with everyone in mind. While merit brings happiness, good brings happiness *and* wisdom. Now is the moment for merit *and* good. Now is the time we benefit from them. Notice how the time has passed.

6 Setting oneself up on the right path

Māra is that part of us that never sees we are wrong when we fail or fear to do something that is right. Māra blinds us from accepting that we are bad, even evil, when we break a precept or harm someone. Māra induces us to pride ourself as Reason or Right in such actions. When we wake up one day and realize we have been wrong and bad, then we shame Māra (this is of course our moral shame, *hiri*); we now have the courage in doing what is right and good: this is moral courage (*vesārajja*). It is tempered with a wholesome moral fear, *ottappa*, because we *fear* doing what is bad or wrong. We have put ourself on the right path.

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