

Māra as comic relief

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

3.3.5.1 The Māra myth, I think, goes back to the time of the Bodhisattva’s ascetic practices, when he was being witnessed by the 5 monks. Clearly, **the departure of the 5 monks** had a significant impact on the Bodhisattva. The 5 monks were disappointed with the Bodhisattva from their own prejudgement of not understanding the significance of turning-point in the Bodhisattva’s spiritual struggle: to give up extreme asceticism and turn to the middle way. [2.1.4.1; 2.1.3]

Surely, the Bodhisattva was himself disappointed with the 5 monks (his closest colleagues, even students, by then) for not having insight into this vital moment. It’s not that he wondered if he were wrong in turning to the middle way; rather he was so certain of it by then, he was ready for another day of deep meditation.

The 5 monks must have departed the same day that the Bodhisattva ate his last meal, given by the lady Sujātā, before the great awakening. Then the Bodhisattva rested during the day and went into deep meditation again just as the sun went down. By then, the 5 monks had left (that same day). The Bodhisattva simply could not share the great joy and confidence he had of awakening; he did not want to be distracted from it just to plead with the 5 monks to remain for the greatest show in the cosmos: the great awakening. He simply had to do it himself, like almost all the greatest discoveries and inventions in human history.

3.3.5.2 Here is my hypothesis: like the best of those teachers who have benefited us, we often recall them as having a great sense of **humour**. We can in fact interpret the Māra story in 2 key “Māra suttas”—**the (Mahā) Padhāna Sutta** (Sn 3.2) and **the Satta Vassa Sutta** (S 4.24)—as the Buddha “getting back” at the 5 monks (with apologies to the Buddha) or, better, to tell a good Indian story with Māra as the protagonist to take all the blame for the prejudgements and misjudgements of our dear colleagues and students. The Buddha turns the failure of the 5 monks in letting him down into a story about bad judgement and what we can learn from it. [2.1.2.15 (3)]

The idea of **Buddhist humour**, as evident here, is about the tension between seeing true reality and not seeing it. We laugh at our inability to see a great event right before us! Just before his awakening, Gotama was able to see that he has found the path to awakening: he only has to reach out into it by discovering it for himself—by realizing it. The group of 5 monks, too, were waiting to see this reality. They had patiently waited with Gotama for 6 years, but on the very day that he would be gaining this realization of true reality (awakening), the 5 monks left him!

We may simply dismiss this as pure stupidity (which it was) or we can laugh at it (expressing our joy) that we are benefitting from this failure because of the Buddha’s compassion and humour. After awakening, the Buddha went to meet the 5 monks to convince them that he is awakened.¹ Once the 5 monks had themselves awakened as arhat, the Buddha would have told them the story of Māra’s assault. This story dramatizes the nature of the Buddha’s awakening: it basically goes “against the stream,” the flow of samsara, demonstrated by Māra’s assault.

¹ Mv 1.6.10-16 (SD 1.1(8)).

Of course, the 5 monks would realize that they had missed the drama of Māra's assault, the preamble to the great awakening; or perhaps they were relieved that they were not there to face Māra and his 10 armies. On the other hand, they understood the nature of such stories, how it would help the world (the ancient Indians anyway) to understand the significance of the great awakening.

3.3.5.3 In the *Neyy'attha Nīt'attha Sutta* (A 2.3.5 f),² the Buddha advises us how to distinguish between literary talk and Dharma language: from the former we must “draw out” the latter. The Māra myth is clearly a case of literary or figurative language, which is *neyy'attha*, the import of which must be drawn out. Like other great myths, the teacher or teller will relate to apply the myth as if it is an integral part of our lives. Indeed, a myth. In other words, the Māra myth is likely to be the Buddha's *arrière pensée*, an idea that only he himself knows. He does not have to tell us it is his idea, since he is already telling us the stories of Māra, which are well based on real life experiences.

The (Mahā) Padhāna Sutta, then, is a great way of allegorizing our close friends, even dearest enemies, with their nasty ways contra us with our best intentions. Now, we have “faith, austerity, energy and wisdom” (Sn 432) to a far greater extent than most of them. We keep noticing their narcissistic tendencies—*sensual pleasures, discontent, hunger and thirst, fear, doubt, hypocrisy and obstinacy, gain, repute, honour, ill-gotten fame, and self-exaltation and belittling others*—which are really Māra's armies (more than 10 of them actually)!

The muñja-grass of relentless advance and *refusing to falter at the foolishness of friends* is the hallmark of the true warrior (the kshatriya class that the Buddha came from). The Buddha is reminding us to be Dharma warriors. Our worst enemies, sadly, are our dear friends (and family) who are unable or refuse to see the wisdom of our ways! Or worse, they think they know us better than we ourselves do. So they end up like the crow pecking at a deliciously coloured rock that looks like a piece of meat (Sn 447).

3.3.5.4 We have taken the stories that the Buddha tells us *literally*, imagining we were there when they happened, that we simply fail to hear or see what the Buddha is *really telling us in the suttas*. Instead of seeking to understand how the Buddha sees the significance of the key events in his own life, we imagine we are judging these events as if we were dealing with them ourselves: “Why? I would have done it this way!” And for **6 years** the 5 monks have followed the Bodhisattva: how long have our friends known us?—but they only see the image of us that they have projected. They fancy themselves all-knowing like Vasavatti himself (Māra that is).

They will simply end up like “the disheartened yaksha” (Sn 449c); they have been letting their guard down all the while. Now that they are seeing or catching a glimpse of how they have failed themselves; they simply have to run: “so overcome by grief, they let the veena fall from their armpit.” Some of them cannot even face us anymore. [3.3.4 f]

Now, “when did Māra appear to the Buddha during the week before awakening?”
There's the rub!

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² A 2.3.5 f/1:60 (SD 2.6b).