

Māra the master ritualist

Excerpt from *SD 61a Māra: a Buddhist mythology of evil and reality of badness*, Piya Tan © 2023.

3.1.4.1 One vital and interesting difference that **sets apart the Buddha and the early arhat** from the modern “power-figure” (especially in a monastic, priest, guru, leader or personality) is that *the Buddha is truly a wholesome communicator while the power figure is merely a master ritualist*. Just as an animal driven in mating ritual attracts a prospective partner or partners, we are often won over, powerfully intoxicated, or at least impressed by the ritual behaviour of another person whether in a staged performance or in social behaviour. Indeed, a successful politician is often *a master ritualist*, too, since properly staged ritual conduct often attracts charisma and power.¹

Most people are drawn to ritual behaviour whether as a personal act (such as saying the mantra, “Open sesame!”² or “Namo Amitābhāya!”), or as a communal act (especially a prayer or blessing ritual) because they believe that such a ritual would purify them of some evil they have done or had cast upon them, or that it would empower them with certain powers, elite status, protection or healing. Often such powers or status tend to attract charisma (to gain respect, adoration and support) from others, especially their followers or intended audience or victims.

In **the TM (Transcendental Meditation) Organization** or Movement of Maharishi Mahesh, for example, the TM initiators were often successful in convincing their initiates that the TM Mantra they were given as their meditation was “secret” and unique. The key “magical” point of the TM mantra was that the initiate was never to divulge it to anyone. Mahesh drew up for his TM teachers the TM Mantra Tables from which the teacher allocated the initiate’s “personal mantra” according to their age, or age and gender, and for a hefty fee!³ Understandably, there were numerous repeat cases of such mantras.⁴

If we see holding back the truth of the nature of these mantras and how they work as deceit, especially on the Guru’s instruction and for the sake of the worldly success of the TM Movement, then clearly we can see Māra behind its phenomenal success while it lasted.⁵

3.1.4.2 The closest we can think of **ritualism** (especially through verbal formulas, *kamma, vācā*) in early Buddhism, is **the sangha act** or sangha-karma (*saṅgha, kamma*). Yet, strictly speaking, such a communal act is never seen as a magical or “mysterious” act where the unified presence of the sangha “purifies” the protagonist of the act. While it is true that the assembled monastics are present as “witnesses,” it is the presence, speech and intention of the protagonist that effectively and successively seals the whole act, whether it is a Paṭimokkha conclave, an ordination procedure or some sangha act.

The sangha act is also a kind of “democratic” act of making known an important decision of the sangha. A motion is read before a properly convened sangha of monastics, and after its 3rd “reading”

¹ Of course, I may be wrong in a situation where there is a serious lack of good leaders to lead us.

² “Open sesame” is a mantra in the story of “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” in Antoine Galland’s version of *One Thousand and One Nights* (1704-1717). For refs [Wiki] 24 April 2024.

³ The personal mantras also depended on the year of the Teacher Training Course (TTC) that the teacher attended. For the actual method of mantra recitation, see the TM Mantra Tables: <http://minet.org/mantras.html> (27 Apr 2024).

⁴ It is well known amongst the Hindus of India that such mantras were freely given and openly practised, not for any attainment but simply as an expression of devotion and inner peace. Strictly speaking, it is something that no one needs or should pay for! Understandably, TM was widely rejected in India. On the TM mantra, see SD 60.1f (2.3). For details on Mahesh and his TM Movement, see SD 60.1f (2).

⁵ On the background and development of TM and related issues, see Youtube “Conversations in the HIVE: Discussing Maharishi and the TM” [Youtube HIVE], esp Prof Dana Sawyer on the origins of TM [Youtube Sawyer]

(recitation), it is carried by “a consensus by silence.”⁶ The most famous sangha-act is clearly that during the 1st Council, when Ānanda was blamed for various “offences” such as not inviting the Buddha to live on his full life-span, and so on. Although Ānanda explained the reasons for his deeds, he accepted them as “offences” out of respect for the sangha.⁷

Such a sangha-act was carried out by Wat Pa Phong (the HQ for Ajahn Chah’s lineage) on Brahmavamsa, who was accused of the offence of ordaining nuns without the sangha’s permission (among other matters). Since Brahmavamsa did not accept the decision of the sangha, he was sadly excommunicated. Brahmavamsa’s monastery thus effectively became a renegade “sect” of its own. Simply put, Brahmavamsa could have accepted the sangha’s decision, and they would have reconciled on such “technicalities.”⁸ Scholars may see this development as an interesting tension between the “old school” forest monastic tradition adamant in keeping to Ajahn Chah’s spirit of early Buddhism, and the rise of Brahmavamsa’s socially engaged modernist popular Buddhism.

As regards Māra’s role in such a modern monastic development, I leave it to the reader’s understanding of what I have written here on Māra.

3.1.4.3 On a personal level, there is the issue of the early Buddhist practice of “**confession**” (*pāṭidesanā*).⁹ Buddhists who are self-conscious about not using any terms that reeks of Christian dogmatism may be concerned that we are importing a term alien to early Buddhism. Since I have expressed my sentiments on this matter, I shall not comment further here [2.1.3.2].

However, there is a popular modern Buddhist term that is connected with the practice of Dharma-spirited confession. That is, pious followers of ethnic Buddhism are often reminded to “ask for forgiveness” (*khamāpana*) for the wrongs and evils they have committed. It also has the sense of accepting something or being accepted by someone.

A few common verbs in this connection are *khamati*,¹⁰ “to forgive (someone) or accept (something),” and *khamātu*,¹¹ “to ask for forgiveness,” that is, literally, “please bear with me.” Clearly here the idea is about accepting another or a teaching; clearly, too, we do not see in early Buddhism any practice of “forgiving” another such as that found in the anti-Buddhist¹² Hindu work, Bhagavad Gītā (ch 11),¹³ where we have this verse:

कायेन वाचा मनसेन्द्रियैर्वा बुद्ध्यात्मना वा प्रकृतेः स्वभावात् । करोमि यद्यद् सकलं परस्मै नारायणायेति समर्पयामि ॥	<i>kāyena vācā manas-endriyair vā budhyātmanā vā prakruteḥ svabhāvāt karomi yadyad sakalam parasmai nārāyaṇāyeti samarpayāmi</i>	By body, speech or mind, by my intellect, soul or other, by any tendency I’ve done, all I offer to Nārāyaṇa (God).
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⁶ On the “**consensus by silence**,” see SD 44.1 (1.4.3.3); for this “consensus” in an ordination, see SD 45.16 (3.2.2). Its better known Latin phrase is *qui tacet consentire videtur*, “he who is silent is taken to agree” or “silence means consent” [3.2.2.2]. This procedure is also observed in international law. See SD 44.1 (2.5).

⁷ On “Ānanda’s trial” during the 1st Council, see V 2:287-289; Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, Singapore 2004:155 (6.28).

⁸ On Brahmavamsa’s excommunication, see SD 1.9 (8-10).

⁹ *Pāṭidesanā* occurs only in late Vinaya works, ie, **Parivāra** (Par 5:119*) and Vinaya Vinicchaya-Uttaravinicchaya (Vvn-Uttvn:Be 806/380).

¹⁰ As in one who accepts a teaching or truth, as stated in (**Anicca**) **Khandha S**: “These teachings (or truths) are **accepted** thus by one after sufficiently pondering (on them) with wisdom” (*yassa ... ime dhammā evarā paññāya mattaso nijjhānaṃ khamanti*, S 25.10/3:228,7), SD 42.17 (or any of the 10 suttas of S 25).

¹¹ **Kokanada S** records the wanderer Kokanada as not recognizing Ānanda at first, thus, “May the venerable Ānanda (please) forgive me” (*khamatu ca me āyasmā ānando ti*, A 10.96/5:198,12).

¹² On the anti-Buddhist polemics in Bhāgavad Gītā, see SD 36.1 (1.7.1).

¹³ Explained in Bhāgavat Purāṇa, canto 11,36. On Bhāgavad Gītā, see [4.1.1.1].

The Sinhala version of Khamāyācanā (Asking for Forgiveness), which was, clearly, composed centuries after the Buddha, and centuries after the Bhāgavad Gītā, either to counter such Hindu influences or because of them in Sri Lanka, contained this well known Puja verse:¹⁴

<i>kāyena vācā cittena</i>	If by deeds, speech or thoughts heedlessly
<i>pamādena mayā kataṃ</i>	I have committed any wrong-doing,
<i>accayaṃ khama me bhante</i>	Forgive me, O Venerable,
<i>bhūripañña tathāgata.</i>	O Victor, Greatly Wise!

In some versions, 2 other verses—seeking forgiveness from the Dhamma and from the Sangha—are also recited.

3.1.4.4 It must be stressed that no such “asking for forgiveness” prayers or practice is found in early Buddhism; it is a feature of modern Sinhala Buddhist pietism. One serious disadvantage about this practice is that a guilt-ridden person may think that he has been “purified” of his guilt, but not strengthened to correct himself of his unwholesome habit. At best, even if this may serve as a symptomatic “relief,” the root habit is not addressed. As such, the wrong-doer may even feel “free” to continue committing the unwholesome habit!¹⁵

Note that devotees tend to recite this “asking for forgiveness” regularly, even daily, as a group or individually. Yet, it is very rare, if ever, that we see such devotees actually giving up any unwholesome habit (if they even reflect on them Dharma-wise). In other words, “asking for forgiveness” is a modern ritual, a popular and authorized form of “**attachment to ritual and vows**” (*sīla-b, bata parāmāsa*). It actually keeps us deluded with the idea that we are “free” from unwholesome habits that we are effectively kept well away from the path, from ever attaining streamwining in this life.

3.1.4.5 The proper way to deal with a negative act is to understand how it is really a recurring symptom of an unwholesome habit. It is the *root* (intention) of the habit that needs to be addressed and corrected. Instead of “asking for forgiveness,” the Buddha teaches us how to strengthen ourselves by recognizing and overcoming unwholesome habits of body, speech and mind by **reflecting on our karma**. In the **Amba, laṭṭhikā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta** (M 61), the Buddha teaches us the following beautiful spiritual exercise of constant, wise review of our deeds, thus:

<u>review by</u>	<u>I should wisely review</u>
(1) karmic door:	my deed done with <u>the body</u> , with <u>speech</u> and with <u>the mind</u> ;
(2) time:	my karma <u>before</u> doing it, <u>while</u> doing it and <u>after</u> doing it;
(3) not doing:	if it is harming <u>me</u> , or harming <u>others</u> , or harming <u>both</u> (ie, the whole world); ¹⁶
(4) doing:	if it is <i>not</i> harming me, or <i>not</i> harming another, or <i>not</i> harming others.

(M 61,9-17/1:415-419), SD 3.10

Wise review of bodily action

(1a) **Before** acting with **my body**, I will review, “*Will* it harm me or others or both?”
 If it *will* harm me or others or both, then, I should not do that unwholesome bodily action.
 If I know it *will not* harm me nor others nor both, then, I should *do* that wholesome bodily action.

¹⁴ The foll Pali and Eng tr are found (as is) in E Indaratana, *Vandanā: The album of Pali devotional chanting and hymns*, Penang, 2002:15 f. [BuddhaNet]

¹⁵ There is a Christian joke on this subject which goes: “I used to pray to God for a bicycle. But that’s not how He works. So I stole a bicycle and prayed for forgiveness.”

¹⁶ **Ummagga S:** “A wise person of great wisdom ... when thinking, only thinks of his own welfare, the welfare of others, the welfare of both, and the welfare of the whole world” (*paṇḍito mahā,pañño ... attā,hitaṃ para.hitaṃ ubhaya,hitaṃ sabba,loka,hitaṃ eva cintamano cinteti*, A 4.186/2:179.7-11), SD 95.17. Comy mentions *asuka*, “such and such, this or that,” thus refers to everyone and everything (ie, the environment) (MA 4:80,15-17+22-24).

- (1b) **While** acting with my body, I will review, “Is it harming me or others or both?”
If it *is* harming me or others or both, then, I should give up that unwholesome bodily action.
If I know it is *not* harming me or others or both, then I should pursue that wholesome bodily action.
- (1c) **After** doing an action with my body, I will review, “Has it harmed me or others or both?”
If it *has* harmed me or others or both, then, I should confess it to the teacher or wise companions.
Having confessed it, I should show *restraint* in the future.
If it has *not* harmed me nor others nor both,
then I should, with zest and joy, train night and day in the wholesome.

Wise review of speech (and communication)

- (2a) **Before** acting with **my speech**,¹⁷ I will review, “Will it harm me or others or both?”
If it *will* harm me or others or both, then, I should not speak that unwholesome speech.
If I know it *will not* harm me nor others nor both, then, I should *speak* that wholesome speech.
- (2b) **While** speaking, I will review, “Is it harming me or others or both?”
If it *is* harming me or others or both, then, I should give up that unwholesome speech.
If I know it is *not* harming me or others or both, then I should pursue that wholesome speech.
- (2c) **After** speaking, I will review, “Has it harmed me or others or both?”
If it *has* harmed me or others or both, then, I should confess it to the teacher or wise companions.
Having confessed it, I should show *restraint* in the future.
If it has *not* harmed me nor others nor both,
then I should, with zest and joy, train night and day in the wholesome.

Wise review of mental action

- (3a) **Before** acting with **my mind**, I will review, “Will it harm me or others or both?”
If it *will* harm me or others or both, then, I should not do that unwholesome mental action.
If I know it *will not* harm me nor others nor both, then, I should *do* that wholesome mental action.
- (3b) **While** acting with my mind, I will review, “Is it harming me or others or both?”
If it *is* harming me or others or both, then, I should give up that unwholesome mental action.
If I know it is *not* harming me or others or both, then I should pursue that wholesome mental action.
- (3c) **After** acting with my mind, I will review, “Has it harmed me or others or both?”
If it *has* harmed me or others or both, then, I should confess it to the teacher or wise companions.
Having confessed it, I should show *restraint* in the future.
If it has *not* harmed me nor others nor both,
then I should, with zest and joy, train night and day in the wholesome.

We can thus see the vital difference between “asking for forgiveness,” which is merely a ritual and not taught by the Buddha, and that “**wise review of karma**” is a moral and mental training taught in the suttas, and which prepares us for the path of awakening. Māra loves rituals, which keeps us to our old habits bringing unwholesome suffering; the Buddha teaches us to rise beyond rituals to wisely review our actions and what we are, so that we free ourselves from cyclic life.

3.1.4.6 One of the commonest ritual behaviours is that of **bribery** (*lañca* or *lañcana*). This word is however not found in the suttas but only in later works. The true practice of **giving** (*dāna*) is the offer-

¹⁷ “Speech” here refers to communicating through speech and words (such as writing), and incl body language (which may also be part of bodily act).

ing of what is wholesome and proper, not as bribery (for bigger gains, and so on), but for the benefit of morally virtuous renunciants and the less fortunate. Sadly, in modern times, gifts and bribery have become a powerful, even accepted and expected, ritual to win over the elite and the powerful.

Usually, giving or generosity in modern times is rarely seen (in religion anyway) as for truly benefiting the poor or needy, but rather for projecting a respectable, even charismatic, self-image, and to win the support or favour of the elite, the intended audience or the masses. Since it is rarely that we are able to read the true intention of such a giver or briber, we are often joyful, or at least politely deferent, especially when we are the recipients of such gifts.

Among Asians (including Buddhists), offering a sumptuous food (such as durian, satay or some expensive meal) is a common means of making a good impression on others. We also tend to be drawn to teachers or leaders with “an air of attainment” or professionalism who would give mantra-like religious advice or quotes which are to be taken without question, but with total faith in the charm and charisma of that person.

Hence, religious bribery may take not only the form of giving meals, money and kudos, but the skill to overwhelm others with one’s air of holiness, power, status or mystique. If we are given the silent treatment by such personalities, we are thus fortunate to be deemed unamenable or immune to their charm or cunning. Most often, however, we are unlikely to see through such a sweet heady air of pomp and deceit. This is, after all, a ritual behaviour projecting charm and guile to draw others, impress them and lead them by their noses. We are thus easily blinded and intoxicated by Māra’s bribery and bait.¹⁸

3.1.4.7 The Nivāpa Sutta (M 25), the discourse on the bait, records the Buddha as describing how religious practitioners who unwarily indulged in food, “fell for the bait and worldliness provided by Māra ... became intoxicated, ... then negligent; when they were negligent, Māra did with them as he liked on account of those bait and worldliness” Even forest dwellers who unwarily indulge in taking food, who lose their dhyana attainment, and who hold all kinds of speculative views will fall prey to Māra’s bait and worldliness, and be overcome by Māra. (M 25,8-10), SD 61.2

Only those practitioners who do not unwarily indulge in taking food but keep to their spiritual practice, free from wrong views, and follow the middle way, are able to be free of Māra. With the attaining of any of the form dhyanas, the formless dhyanas, or cessation, they are said “to have **blinded Māra**, to have destroyed (all) traces of Māra’s sight; the evil one is unable to see (them).” (M 25,12-20).

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¹⁸ For teachings on Māra as a hunter and “Māra’s bait,” see **Nivāpa S** (M 25), SD 61.2.