

Māra the shape-shifter

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

3.3.1.1 What does Māra look like? We really don't know because when he does manifest himself in the early Buddhist stories, he is either invisible or assumes some form that is meant to terrify those who see him. Māra is thus a mirror in which we see our worst fears and the evil in our own minds. We can thus speak of Māra as a shape-shifter or metamorph.

Shapeshifting, as an idea known in mythology, folklore and speculative fiction, is found in the oldest forms of totemism¹ and shamanism,² as well as the oldest extant literature and epic poems such as the Epic of Gilgamesh³ and the Iliad.⁴ The idea is also a common literary device in modern fantasy, children's literature and popular culture.

Māra has no identifiable "personal" or "original" form because he is merely an allegory or externalization of the 3 unwholesome roots (greed, hatred and delusion), elaborated as Māra's "10 armies": *sensual pleasure, discontent, hunger-and-thirst, craving, sloth-and-torpor, fear, doubt, hypocrisy-and-obstinacy, reputation and gains, and self-exaltation* [2.1.2.8]. These are *not* merely "psychological" states (we don't only "think" we have them) but, when indulged or affected by them, will bring on karmic and real effects; hence, they are both moral and spiritual states, too.

3.3.1.2 While Māra is not an external reality like the earth, water, fire or wind, it can have real effects on us whether we believe in the idea or not. Our **psychological** condition—the propensity to know, feel, imagine and think—act as the stage, screen or VR (virtual reality) headset, or a dream or dream-state where such realities are projected. Furthermore, our **unconscious** or latent tendencies (*anusaya*) induce us to think (hence to believe) and act in ways over which we do not have any control, despite believing otherwise. Māra is following us right now; we may notice him in time.

The belief and reality created by our idea of Māra often occur when we are caught in an emotionally charged milieu or when we are induced to set aside our basic beliefs and principles of goodness by some challenging beliefs or expectations. A good illustration here is when a local Chinese family performs their filial or social duties in dealing with a close departed relative.

Their self-notion, beliefs about the nature of death, and common superstitions will induce them to have visions of the departed, often rooted in fear or guilt, and their relatives and familiars are likely to sympathize with them, or blame them. Hence, there is a powerful incentive to ensure they have performed the correct death rites and duties (usually chants, devotional offerings and ritual acts). Since public perception is paramount to them, elaborate rituals are performed by death professionals (whom they assume as "knowing" better, than them).

¹ A totem (from Ojibwe *doodem*) is a spirit being (such as a tutelary spirit or spirit guide), sacred object, or symbol that serves as an emblem of a group of people, such as a family, clan, lineage, or tribe.

² The OED def a shaman as "a man or woman who is regarded as having direct access to, and influence in, the spirit world which is usu manifested during a trance and empowers them to guide souls, cure illnesses, etc. The word prob comes from the Tungusic Evenki language of North Asia. Although sounding close to P *samaṇa* or Skt *śramaṇa*, there is no evidence to show that they are related.

³ Gilgamesh ("the ancestor who is a youth") was the semi-mythic King of Uruk best known as the hero of **the Epic of Gilgamesh** (c 2150-1400 BCE), the great Babylonian poem written in Akkadian that predates Homer's Iliad and Odyssey by 1500 years and, therefore, stands as the oldest piece of epic world literature. [Wiki] 18 Feb 2024.

⁴ The Iliad and the Odyssey (prob late 8th or early 7th cent BCE) were independent stories from a long oral tradition. **The Iliad** is set towards the end of the Trojan War, a ten-year siege of the city of Troy (Gk *Ilium*) by a coalition of Mycenaean Greek states, the poem depicts significant events in the siege's final weeks, in particular, the fierce quarrel between King Agamemnon and the warrior, Achilles. The *Iliad* is often regarded as the first substantial piece of European literature, and one of the oldest extant literary works still widely read by modern audiences.

Hence, Māra does not have a specific look but assumes the appearances and actions that we are induced to take during such extraordinary occasions or states. Appearances matter more than reality—virtual reality outshines true reality—in the practical world of perception, profit and prosperity. Such an attitude is often rooted in the worst of our fears or fed by the best of our intentions. They are, as a rule, not the normal course of actions or appearances that we would normally take in our daily public life.

3.3.1.3 On a social and historical scale, we see Māra projected commensurately and diversely. We may even say that Māra as pulling the strings from above such developments: remember his 10 armies? [3.3.1.1]. This is very much bigger than we imagine from our daily lives. Let us take one very significant socio-historical development—the **Axial Age**—roughly a millennium before early Buddhism and a millennium after—when religion in the major civilized areas of the world (Persia, India, China, Israel and Greece) turned away from *priestcraft* and adopted self-valuing systems where “man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations.”⁵

These religions and systems succeeded in their own times and soon after, but historically the Axial Age failed. Whatever appears socially big and good attracts vast numbers of people; people means **power**. Māra loves power; Māra is power—lordship over others for its own sake. **The (Catukka) Paññatti Sutta** (A 4.15) records the Buddha as declaring that “the foremost of those who exercise power is Māra the evil one” (*etad-aggam ādhipateyyānam*), that “Māra is the foremost of the powerful” (*aggam ... māro ādhipateyyānam*).⁶

This is where Māra does his work best: theologians, religious teachers, despots and emperors pilfered and programmed these religions for their purposes.

Ironically, they [the Axial Age religions] became that which they critiqued: Patriarchy and elitism soon reasserted themselves in the organizations that formed to perpetuate their teachings. With Constantine’s victory Christianity became Christendom. Later European kings ruled by divine right, and their Asian equivalents (who must have extraordinarily good karma from past lifetimes!) often declared themselves to be bodhisattvas or even Buddhas. The Catholic Church persecuted heretics, subordinated women, sponsored crusades against Jewish and Muslim heathens, and justified brutal empires.

The basic problems continue to the present day. Today over 70 percent of white evangelicals still support Donald Trump, while Buddhist majorities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar defend the Buddhadharma by killing Hindu Tamils and Muslim Rohingyas, respectively. Nationalism has been described by Arnold Toynbee as “ninety percent of the religion of ninety percent of the people of the Western world and of the rest of the world as well.”⁷ Yet again, a sacralized social order is sanctifying tribalism.

(David Loy, “The deep roots of Māra and Mammon,” 2019:237)

3.3.1.4 Even within Buddhism itself (surely within its urban and urbanized forms), we see modern Buddhists affirming the notion that **prosperity** is good karma and Buddhism is **religious capital**. The teachings are measured, monetized and negotiated (merits can be transferred!), attracting well-intended young monastics who hope to lead a moral life of study and practice. Some still need to support their families of aged parents and are burdened with poverty. Working for an academic degree provides them with a chance to rise in the monastic ranks or perhaps be able to get a proper job before reaching 40.

Those who are more ambitious may work to gain some ecclesiastical title, which will look good in the eyes of the Buddhist elite, professionals and masses who will then support them. There is, of

⁵ Karl Jaspers, tr M Bullock, *The Origin and Goal of History*, New Haven: Yale Univ Press, 1953:2.

⁶ A 4.15/2:17.

⁷ Arnold Toynbee, *Change and Habit: the challenge of our time*, NY: Oxford Univ Press, 1966:112.

course, the better of both worlds. One's learned qualifications may make one a better teacher; if not it would at least make one feel or appear professional.⁸

In this professional scenario, **meditation** becomes a therapeutic, even magical, ritual (after all, clients are less guided by Buddhism than driven by their pain and lack). It surely can't be bad magic when modern psychology is recruiting and re-branding Buddhism. The teachers or healers only need to pay for a licence in some professional meditation course (like the MBSR).⁹ One can gain a licence within weeks, which is enough time to learn the modern techniques—one need not even master the states of meditative calm and insight; the licence gives one **the status** of meditation teacher and therapist. This is the modern shaman.

Furthermore, in a scenario where Buddhist temples' incomes can be more than S\$10M a year, they can afford to employ an army of professional and deferential staff to run their religious machinery efficiently. Buddhist centre runners tend to look up to Buddhist professionals—remember that one's prosperity is an omen of good karma; so too a high social status—as the anointed leaders whose good karma implies that they already know the Dharma.

Of course, there are minor forgivable misjudgements or embarrassments like when a devout Christian sits in one of the committees for Buddhist social work. He was kind enough to admit that he was experienced in social work but no one asked him about his religion! In another development, a highly successful professional visited a temple to investigate about Buddhism. Almost at once he was invited to give a public talk. He went on to talk about God, the soul, and heaven. When someone in the baffled crowd was civil enough to ask the ultimate question: Are you a Buddhist? No, he replied, I'm Christian!¹⁰

There are many other interesting cases where we see Māra in his **asura** form working amongst professional Buddhists. To write about this would fill another book. Only when we learn to face the realities of our follies and strengthen ourselves with the suttas, sensibility and respect for Buddhism, can we start to prevent such Māranic antics from characterizing our actions and lives. In the meantime, we simply must ensure that we are not fooled by appearances by the master of disguises.

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⁸ On modern Buddhist education and practice, see SD 60.1c (2); also "The scholars' Buddhism," SD 60.1c (6.3).

⁹ Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, an 8-week "mindfulness" course introduced by Jon Kabat-Zinn: SD 60.1d (4.2.2.2).

¹⁰ These real incidents occurred in Singapore around 2010 and 2015 respectively.