

Māra as “skillful means”

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

4.3.1.1 In early Buddhism, **skillful means** (*upāya*) is a wholesome method of teaching Dharma in the language of the subject’s experience so that the subject sees the Dharma in himself, resulting in the attaining of the path of awakening. In later Buddhism, however, the skillful means—such as those of the Lotus Sutra and Zen—is often used as a polemical rationalization to trivialize early Buddhist teachings, even to debunk them and to knock down opponents.

Zen stories like the one written by Danxia Tianran (Jap, Tanka Tennen, 739-824), about burning a Buddha image to keep himself warm, told in the right spirit, may help us see through the nature of rituals and vows (of which Zen has numerous, by the way!).

However, there is a Zen story crafted by modern Japanese Zen master Tanzan (1819-1892), professor of philosophy at the Japanese Imperial University,¹ about how he himself allegedly carried a beautiful young woman across a stream and was castigated by a fellow monk Ekido for breaking a Vinaya rule. (Some retellers of this tale sometimes, for their own reasons, refer to Ekido as a “Vinaya monk.”)² Tanzan’s riposte was, “Look, I set that girl down back at the crossing. Are you still carrying her?”

If we are to interpret this Zen quip, it seems that so long as one is *seen* to do good, it does not matter if any rules of morality, even when one has taken them, are broken. Is it really “better to be kind than to be right” (a hallmark of celebrity Buddhism)—the point is why not be *both* in a wholesome manner? Apparently based on the same logic, a Sinhalese High Priest claimed that he touches money “only with the hands, not the heart.” We can hear Māra smilingly adding, “Of course, the two situations are different!” [2.6.3.1 (18)].

The above two not so amusing cases of religious casuistry can be understood by way of the psychology of defence mechanism, which is a sophisticated form of lying called **rationalization**. What these religious professionals have cleverly, even righteously, stated is actually the truth, but what is projected is truly a lie! Rationalization is, in fact, using the truth, whether it is technology, learning or the Dharma, but the intention is to champion a **lie**.

4.3.1.2 Throughout history, **the deity of love** (whether a god or a goddess) has, as a rule, a place in the heart of almost every person, especially the young. In fact, Māra is often depicted as some kind of deity of love, as Kāma, in the Mahāyāna texts (in Sanskrit). Aśva,ghoṣa (**Buddhacarita** 13.2) (1st-2nd cent CE) and Kṣemendra (**Bodhisattv’avadāna**

¹ On Tanzan, see SD 30.8 (8.3.2). Significantly, Japanese Buddhism was secularized during Tanzan’s lifetime, by Meiji law in 1868; in other words, officially there are neither monks nor nuns in Japan! For details, see SD 60.1c (1.102).

² Zen priests are, firstly not monastics in the Vinaya sense; secondly, since the Meiji delegalization of Zen monasticism by the *nikuji-saitai* law (1872); by law, they are *not* to keep to any Vinaya rules! (SD 66.13 (3.4.3, 3.9). I was once told there are “Zen monks” (celibate Zen monastic practitioners); it would be interesting to know how they keep to the Vinaya in modern Japan.

Kalpalatā 2,583.61) (11th cent) identify him with Kāma,deva (Cupid of Western myth). In **the Lalita Vistara** (3rd-4th cent CE), Māra is the overlord of lust (*kāmâdhipati*; Lalv 130.8).

The Divyâvadāna (2nd cent), in its heart-warming story of Māra and the great arhat Upagupta, depicts them parting as good friends. It is even said that Māra was converted (Divy 357, 361, 363). The Burmese adaptation of this famous story, **the Loka,paññatti** (11th-12th cent), says that Māra even vowed to become a buddha himself in the future [2.6.3.3 (29b)]. But then again, Māra, the lord of deception, could have just pretended to do so (Perfection of Wisdom in 100,000 Lines, 1186).

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