

Is Māra sexless?

Excerpt from *SD 61a Māra: a Buddhist mythology of evil and the reality of badness*, An introductory essay by TAN Beng Sin (Piya Tan) ©2007, 2012; rev & enl 2024.

3.3.2.1 Māra, from the start, is the lord of the sense-world, inhabiting the highest sense-heaven, that of Paranimmita Vasavatti [1.2.1.4]. On account of Māra's location, understandably he regularly attempts to distract meditators or hinder those intent on any wholesome deed in the sense world. Now, we know that Māra's 3 daughters—Taṇhā, Aratī and Rāgā [2.2.2]—try to seduce the Buddha but fail. Māra himself tries to distract a few nuns from their meditation with philosophical questions but fails, too [2.4].

On at least 2 separate occasions, Māra disguises himself as a handsome youth and approaches the nun Khemā [2.4.2.4a] and the nun Vijayā [2.4.2.4b], trying to seduce them but is roundly rejected each time. Māra must have thought that since Khemā started off as a beautiful woman infatuated with her beauty, and Vijayā, also a beautiful woman, as Khemā's pupil, they would still have sensual feelings.

With such a dialogue, one might expect each of Māra's overtures to be aimed at sexual seduction, but this occurs only, it seems, in these 2 suttas and maybe a few others. The actual themes of the suttas vary widely and expose us to a broad range of perspectives on the attitudes and insights of the renunciant life. The contrast between the allurements and the misery of sensual pleasures is the theme of **Aḷavikā Sutta** (S 5.1), **Vijayā Sutta** (S 5.4), **Uppala,vaṇṇā Sutta** (S 5.5) and **Khemā Therī,gāthā** (Thī 139). In all these cases, the nuns sharply rebuke Māra with verses that reveal their utter indifference to his solicitations.

3.3.2.2 What's interesting about Māra's temptations of these nuns [3.3.2.1] is that it is *not* about sex at all. Since Māra is a Paranimmita Vasavatti deva (of the highest of the sense-heavens), he is incapable of having sex with humans unless he assumes the form of a physical human. Even then he will not enjoy it at all since the human body would be foul and bestial to him compared to the celestial form of the devas.¹

As a deva, Māra would find **human smell** intolerably annoying,² like the odour of a cadaver. Even for the lord of death, this would be insubordinating and unnecessary, since he is also lord of the sense-world. The point is that Māra is not soliciting the nuns for sex; rather, he is tempting them to see if they would fall for his wiles. However, being *awakened* nuns, they recognize Māra, who then at once vanishes.

3.3.2.3 In a cosmic sense, Māra is **the prime patriarch**: he is lord, patriarch of all life, the Man. In Māra's patriarchate, that is, samsara, women only serve to populate his domain and, secondarily, as represented by his 3 daughters, to entice men with sensual pleasures so that they fall into creating new lives and minions for Māra. Hence, we see a bottom-heavy world here, with the hells as the most densely populated and most suffering stratum of samsaric existence.

The heavens are much more spacious and less densely populated compared to the lower worlds. The higher we get in the celestial hierarchy of the form deva realms and the formless brahma realms, the more spacious and the more blissful the space. The sense

¹ D 23,9.10/2:235 (SD 39.4); DhA 15.8/3:269-272; SD 54.21.

² "Devas are annoyed by human odour" (*manussa,gandho deve ubbāhati*, D 23,9/2:325), SD 39.4; DA 3:810; MA 2:416.

world beings are body-based; hence, easily accessed and controlled by Māra. The form world and the formless world are mind-based rooted in dhyana.

Māra is blinded by **dhyana** (*jhāna*), like good health keeps us free from disease; but when these celestial beings are out of their dhyana, Māra can still access them [3.2.2.2]. Anyway, even those in the highest realm, despite their astronomically long lifespan, still have an ending by the very fact that they exist in time (unlike nirvana, beyond time and space; hence, death-free).

3.3.2.4 We only know that Māra has 3 “daughters” (*māra, dhītā*)— **Taṇhā** (Craving), **Aratī** (Discontent) and **Rāgā** (Lust) [2.2.2]—but we are not told about how they arose or who their mother is. We do know, however, that they are the first 3 of Māra’s 10 armies (Sn 436) [2.1.2.8]. Furthermore, an educated guess is that Māra, as a deva, generated them parthenogenetically, by way of an asexual reproduction where the offspring are produced without any female egg being fertilized by any male sperm (such as in the case of the Indian stick insect, *Carausius morosus*).

We find clues in the Abhidhamma and later works regarding how **the 6 sense-world heavens** are inhabited by devas, male and female, who, like humans, reproduce through sexual union, but of a subtler celestial kind. Such a union takes the form of *an embrace, the holding of hands, a smile, or a mere look*.³ Their offspring, young devas—called *deva, putta* (“celestial sons”) and *deva, dhītā* (“celestial daughters”) —are not born from the womb but arise instantly and whole in the form of a beautiful 5-year-old child in the lap of the gods (Abhidharmakośa 3:69 f).⁴

Humans, on the other hand, go through a complicated process of mating, sexual reproduction and parenting. Human mating is basically through the meeting of a male sexual organ and a female sexual organ. When this mating is successful (it is not always so), the embryo then forms and gestates, as a rule, for 9 months in a woman’s womb. Even then, humans, unlike animals, non-humans and devas, are born physically and cognitively premature and need their parents or adults to protect them and teach them the human ways.

The Māra myth seems undeveloped in this dimension (sexuality). We only have one early text—the **Māra Dhītu Sutta** (S 4.25)—that explicitly mentions Māra’s 3 daughters in the role of pleasing men and being compliant to them; in other words, they try to seduce the Buddha but fail.⁵ Māra’s daughters are thus a foil to the Buddha, proving that he is fully awakened and free from samsara and its enticements and weaknesses. However, that seems about all regarding the role of Māra’s daughters, and we almost do not hear about them any more.

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³ Further on the sexuality of the sense-world devas, see SD 54.31 (3.3.3.3).

⁴ See **Early Buddhist cosmology**, SD 57.10 ().

⁵ S 4.25/1:125-127 (SD 36.6).