

## In what sense is Māra evil?

**Source: Devāsura Saṅgāma Sutta (A 9.39, SD 61.21)**, in our battle with Māra we are only safe with a liberated mind © Piya Tan, 2018, 2024.

**3.1.2.1** As James W Boyd insightfully points out in his paper, “Symbols of evil in Buddhism” (1971:72 f),<sup>1</sup> “[t]his is not to say that the Buddhist associates the whole of samsara with ‘evil,’ however, for such a rendering of *pāpa* carries a number of connotations not always applicable to certain usages of the Sanskrit-Pali term. In so far as ‘evil’ denotes that which is fundamentally undesirable (lowly, miserable, worthless), a proper synonym for it being that which is ‘ill’ (troublesome, inferior), the English term ‘evil’ is an acceptable translation of *pāpa*.”<sup>2</sup>

Etymologically, according to Indologist Wilhelm Rau, Skt *pāpāḥ* most probably refers to that which is essentially *miserable, full of suffering, and inferior*.<sup>3</sup> Manfred Mayrhofer notes the connection between the Sanskrit/Pali *pāpa* and Greek *pema*.<sup>4</sup> T W Rhys Davids, in his *Pali-English Dictionary* (1921-25), links both the Greek *pema* and *talaiporos* (defining both as “suffering, evil”) to *pāpa*. Windisch says, in *Māra und Buddha*, that *pāpman* in older Sanskrit literature means “not only the morally bad, but more objectively, misfortune, sorrow and pain ... .” (1895:192)<sup>5</sup>

The Pali Commentaries gloss *pāpa* as *akusala*, “unwholesome” (Khpa 142; SnA 1:300), *mahā,dukkham*, “great suffering” (ItA 1:177); *lāmaka*, (of a person) “inferior, bad” (VA 2:486). Besides, “evil” also connotes that which is “not morally good” (wicked), as well as what is “morally depraved, bad, wicked, vicious; doing or tending to do harm; hurtful, mischievous, prejudicial” (OED). These words may describe samsara but also certainly are Māra’s well-known characteristics.

The moralistic or deeply negative connotations here may apply to human habits or to those of vicious non-humans, but they go beyond the Buddhist definition of *pāpa* as applied to the normal nature of samsara. For example, the impermanent (*maccu,māra*) and non-substantial (*khandha,māra*) conditions of samsara are not intrinsically harmful but are natural realities; such terms as “morally bad or evil” are rather descriptive of actions of humans and other beings with regard to their own spiritual growth or lack of it; and of course, descriptive of Māra.

Buddhists would maintain that **samsara** (*saṃsāra*), the cycle of existence, though identifiable with suffering, also constitutes those conditions which enable us to attain awakening. It is only in and through samsara that nirvana can be realized; this, of course, depends on one’s attitude towards samsara. Clinging to the seeming attractions of samsara produces suffering; keeping to the path of awakening leads one through and out of samsara to awakening and freedom.

**3.1.2.2** What early Buddhism regards as morally bad and harmful is not samsara or nature itself— it’s the nature of fire to burn. What is morally evil is the karma-producing defilements (*kilesa*) which bind us to samsara. Basically, these are *greed, hatred and delusion*, that produce a variety of negative emotions: *sensual pleasure, discontent, hunger-*

<sup>1</sup> J W Boyd, “Symbols of evil in Buddhism,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 31.1 1971:63-75.

<sup>2</sup> All the Buddhist sources Boyd quoted (PED, Windisch, *Māra und Buddha*, 1895:192; SED) and sources I consulted after him (Andersen, *Pali Glossary*,1901; BHSD *pāpaka*; DP) incl “evil” in their defs.

<sup>3</sup> W Rau, *Staat und Gesellschaft im Alten Indien*, Wisbaden, 1957: 32 ff, 61. [[Heidelberg](#)] 11 Aug 2024.

<sup>4</sup> *A Concise Etymological Sanskrit Dictionary*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1962:255. [[Sanskrtam.ru](#)] 12 Aug 2024.

<sup>5</sup> “Es bezeichnet nicht nur das moralisch Schlechte, sondern auch, mehr objectiv, Unglück, Leid, Schmerz.” J W Boyd’s tr of the German (1971:72 n39).

and-thirst, craving, sloth-and-torpor, fear, doubt, hypocrisy-and-obstinacy, reputation and gains, and self-exaltation<sup>6</sup> (Sn 436-438).

*Kilesa, māra*, Māra as defilements, refers to our drives in activating such defilements. Even in harming others, we harm ourselves the most, perpetuating our cycle of life and death, rebirth and redeath. We are then *māretā*, “Māra the killer,” the habituality of our immoral thoughts, speech and acts. The psychological bent for evil makes us the archetypal actor, *devaputta, māra*, “the deity Māra,” enemy of the Buddha, his disciples and those who seek the path.

A very insidious manifestation of **Deity Māra** (here he deserves and loves capital letters) is the Dark Lord, High Priest of Deceit, Guru of Guile, and so on. You are simply convinced he must be good, even godly; his looks, charms, demeanour, even kindness and generosity; a master of words and wiles. You will do his bidding without hesitance or question, even take the blame for any failure. You will sternly stop even one near or dear who speaks ill of him. Sounds familiar?

While the deity Māra may induce brahmins and householders to “**revile, abuse, vex and annoy**”<sup>7</sup> the monks for rejecting their mainstream brahminical dogmas and karmas (beliefs and rituals), he is often very much more subtle in his ways. We are driven to be “**bent on sense-desire**”<sup>8</sup> or become “**confused and perplexed**”<sup>9</sup> about the teachings. Very often, we are “**interrupted**” or confronted with an obstacle<sup>10</sup> in our efforts to calm and clear our minds, to search the suttas, or to listen to the teachings. Such an interruption may be as mundane or trivial as **an ox** wandering close by.<sup>11</sup> These are really the covert trickeries of Deity Māra.

**3.1.2.3** We see here the deity Māra’s patent tendency of “**interrupting or disrupting**” good actions, mythically depicted in various ways from the down-to-earth “wandering ox” to Māra’s fearsome assault on the Bodhisattva on the night of the great awakening. Deity Māra is the great adversary, the “external killer” (*māretā*) depiction of *pāpa*. Māra can assail us with his horde of demons to prevent or discourage us from our dedication to sutta study, Dharma work or an act of kindness, or more often, he would furtively and dastardly thwart our efforts in good and kindness so that we think that we have failed in our efforts because we have not tried hard enough.

For this reason, we are often reminded to cultivate **lovingkindness to ourselves**: that we *are well and happy, firm and faithful, joyful and wise*, in our efforts as practitioners; that we *accept ourselves just as we are*; that we *forgive ourselves* all the wrongs we have done and for the shortcomings that we have. We will rise like the lotus from Māra’s murky waters into the bright clear light of Dharma.

The fact that this external *māretā* aspect is expressed in mythical rather than analytical Dharma terms raises an important question. Should the *devaputta, māra* and its connotations be regarded as integrally connected with the concept of *pāpa*, or is it a mythological narrative applied simply as a “skillful means” when needed?

**3.1.2.4** The traditional attitude towards **mythology** in Buddhism is that it is merely “stories,” or that it is a “skillful means” in teaching Dharma. Yet, when we examine how we speak with others, and how we tend to be “metaphorical” or “mythical” when we need to

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<sup>6</sup> These are Māra’s 10 “armies,” mentioned in the account of the Bodhisattva’s early struggle with Māra found in (**Mahā**) **Padhāna S** (S 3.2), SD 51.11.

<sup>7</sup> *Akkosanti paribhāsanti rosentī vihesenti* (M 50,12/1:334), SD 36.4.

<sup>8</sup> *Kāmesu ... nameyya* (S 486\*/4.20/1:117), SD 61.17.

<sup>9</sup> *Vicakkhu, kammāya* lit, “for making eyeless,” (S 4.12/1:110), SD 61.26; Skt *vicakṣukarma* (Mvst 3:416).

<sup>10</sup> (*Devaputta. māro, pi*) *antarāyāya upakkamati*, “sets up an obstacle” (ItA 2:73).

<sup>11</sup> (**Māra**) **Patta S** (S 4.16/1:112), SD 61.11.

stress a point, we see it as a vital aspect of human communication, and even more so in spiritual lessons. We speak of Māra<sup>12</sup> in mythical terms because we are highlighting a persistent and timeless reality of which we are unaware and need to resolve on a daily basis.

Mythically, Mara is the source of disruption and offensiveness. However, the external conditions which interrupt meditation or incline humans towards morally harmful thoughts and actions constitute very mundane circumstances, such as malicious brahmins, wandering buffaloes, etc. Although all of these episodes are described as deeds of Mara the evil one, this mythical association is nothing more than a means of identifying different kinds of experiences that have *the same negative result*, that of *destroying good, promoting evil and weakening the mind*.<sup>13</sup>

The same may be said of the mythical references to Mara's daughters, named "Craving," "Discontent," and "Lust," and Māra's armies [3.1.2.2]. **Metaphor** gives life and light to these powerful states, highlighting their *power* so that we do not dismiss them or fail to know and avoid them. These states are real in themselves and affect us directly and durably. These negative qualities are, in fact, present and active in all the 4 kinds of Māra.

**3.1.2.5** The Pali commentaries expand beyond the 4<sup>th</sup> Mara, *maccu,māra*, by referring to a 5<sup>th</sup> Māra, *abhisāṅkhāra,māra*.<sup>14</sup> The term *abhisāṅkhāra* refers to the accumulation or habituality (*abhi-*) of karma (*saṅkhārā*), and, as Māra, is simply a broad term for an internal *māretā* (*kilesa,māra*). The significance of this 5<sup>th</sup> Māra not only points to the flexible nature of the Māra mythology, but also highlight the fact that ultimately, it is the internal, not the external, *māretā* that is the true source of insidious *pāpa*. That is, *pāpa* arises not from the disruptive external circumstances themselves, but rather *from how we respond to them*.

As unawakened beings, an effective defence against Māra is our own intellectual, emotional, and volitional karmic fortitude against the overwhelming odds of the tantalizing and insidious powers of *pāpa*. This defence is especially potent when we understand and accept both the rational (analytical) and mythical aspects of Māra. Where Buddhist scholars uphold a highly *analytical* approach to experience and reasoning, they tend to view mythology as the most dispensable of all the Dharma tools.<sup>15</sup> This, however, is not saying that they entirely dismiss the didactic or narrative usefulness of *devaputta,māra*.

**3.1.2.6** The Māra myth is still part of the 4-Mara set because it provides a way of teaching the unskilled laity in picture-story-form what the more advanced followers are able to digest in analytical terms. The *devaputta,māra* provides a narrative or illustration rather than a discursive means of conveying deeper truths about samsara as being impermanent (*maccu,māra*), nonsubstantial (*khandha,māra*), and often attracting negative karmic response (*kilesa,māra*), all of which are fundamentally undesirable and inferior conditions of existence (*pāpa*). Hence, the symbolic function of the *devaputta,māra* is to serve as a bridge "between popular demonology on the one hand, and the abstract terms of the Dhamma on the other."<sup>16</sup>

This viewpoint finds commentarial support in the distinction between **the 2 ways of teaching** used by the Buddha: the conventional (*sammuti,desanā*), using daily or worldly language, and the ultimate (*paramattha,desanā*), discourse pertaining to ultimate truths.

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<sup>12</sup> I have used the spelling Māra (with initial capital M) and not distinguish any "common noun" "māra," since the 2 senses often overlap, and all such terms have to do with the being Māra.

<sup>13</sup> Hence, the Dhammapada records the Buddha as stating, "Avoid all evil, cultivate the good, purify the mind—this is the teaching of all the Buddhas" (Dh 183), SD 51.21 (1.2).

<sup>14</sup> ThaA:Be 1:387; UA 216,8+11.

<sup>15</sup> See W L King, "Myth in Buddhism: essential or peripheral?" *Journal of Bible and Religion* 29 July 1961:211-218.

<sup>16</sup> T O Ling, *Buddhism and the Mythology of Evil*, 1962:77.

Thus, terms like *deva* and *māra* are those used in *sammuti,desanā*, to be distinguished from *paramattha,desanā* which uses terms such as *anicca, dukkha, anattā, khandha*, and so on.<sup>17</sup> In this distinction of teaching methods, the Buddhist mythology of evil as a learning tool especially for the laity and neophyte, falls under the category of the conventional.

R901 Inspiration 544

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<sup>17</sup> DA 2:282; MA 1:137; AA 1:95; ItA 1:82; KvuA 35 f.