

My encounter with Māra

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

3.3.8.1 While knowing the Buddha Dharma for the whole of my adult life greatly helps in understanding the nature of Māra and writing about it in an engaging way, it is the experience of having actually met Māra in person that well equips me to put the words and feelings into a convincing testimony that will perhaps spur you into wholesome and courageous action.

More exactly, it is the fact that I have met Māra in person, yet did not recognize him then. At that time, I even thought that he could have been a friend, and not for a moment did I even suspect that he was determined to destroy me, to end the Buddhist work I am doing, to deprive me of the Dharma, to lose faith in it, that is the meaning and love of my life.

Writing this reflection is healing in the sense that it helps me better understand how I could have allowed Māra into my life at that time. In hindsight, I even wondered why I had not fled from his presence and resorted to a far better place that was peaceful and productive for my life and work. Yet with foresight, I wonder if there can ever be such a place. With great relief, I can now look back at it all as a learning memory—that such suffering makes us wiser and closer to the Dharma.

Then again, even if I had known it *was* Māra then, even with all the knowledge and experience that I have now, would these be effective against him at that time—he was Māra! Perhaps it was my habitual curiosity about people, and the courage to face them in their worst moments that kept me emotionally intact despite Māra’s deceptions. How could anyone pretend to ostentatiously uphold the Dharma go on to insidiously abuse that same Dharma, abuse unlovingly the innocent who bowed together with him before the same Buddha shrine?

3.3.8.2 Despite the disgust for what Māra had shamelessly done to others and to me, I had no fear of him at all. Rather, it was sadness and disappointment at his flagrant callousness towards others, toying with them as objects and playthings; his contempt for what is good, and lack of fear of karma. It was as if he envied or feared any good done by others because he thought he could not do any. It’s clear now that Māra had no control over his own views and self. It seems he could not accept that the self was void; he tried to fill himself up with the power of pleasure over others; he was crushed by his insatiability that is a cosmic burden of empty senses. He could not love, much less be kind to others.

Those who had suffered at Māra’s hands could only lament and huddle together like scholars who have failed their exams. Those who were told of Mara’s misdeeds thought that Māra could not have been bad since he did nothing to them, or that he was related to those in power. Moreover, to be good, it seems, one must be seen to do good; this is dealing with bad, and so can’t be good. The point seems that when the suffering of others is too great or complicated, surely it is just bad karma. Māra brings out the bad and the fear in even those we look up to as good.

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing. Those who think of themselves as neutral are often complicit in allowing the evils going on around them when they could have made some effort to stop them. We often turn a blind eye to things that are wrong out of convenience and cowardice. Evil becomes convenient when we deny that Māra exists. To deny Māra is to bow to him. To know Māra is to reject Māra: “I know you, you are Māra!” [2.3.3.2]

3.3.8.3 So long as I did not know it was Māra, for that long I suffered foolishly, ignorantly. For too long had Māra existed amongst us disguised, yet familiar. Not knowing Māra, we see him as Buddha (we all have the Buddha-seed, right?) or God (we are God’s creatures?). If Māra were Buddha, then, surely we do not know the Buddha. Just because Māra may not have molested you does not mean that he is a good person; rather, he did not deem you worthy as a victim since you are charmed by his outward kindness, bought over by his handouts of praises and meals. Hence, having known Māra, I can now only pity him deeply, show him compassion; and pity those who have been deceived by him.

Māra is thus the one amongst us who suffers the most of samsara—who *is* samsara. He wants to share his sufferings with us, too. He is either unwilling or unable to learn from it all; surely, he must be the slowest and densest of us all! This describes well the cosmic narcissist; he has deceived even himself. Knowing Māra then is a profound lesson about *learning, changing and freeing oneself*—just as the Buddha has done.

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