

The Buddha's Encounters with Māra the Tempter

Their Representation in Literature and Art

by

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The Buddha's Encounters with Māra the Tempter

I. Introduction

In his *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names* Professor G.P. Malalasekera introduces Māra as “the personification of Death, the Evil One, the Tempter (the Buddhist counterpart of the Devil or Principle of Destruction).” He continues: “The legends concerning Māra are, in the books, very involved and defy any attempts at unravelling them.”¹

Analysing a series of allusions to Māra in the commentarial literature, he further elaborates on his definition with the following observations:

- (i) “In the latest accounts, mention is made of five Māras—Khandhamāra, Kilesamāra, Abhisāṅkhāramāra, Maccumāra, and Devaputtamāra. Elsewhere Māra is spoken of as one, three, or four.”²
- (ii) “The term Māra, in the older books, is applied to the whole of the worldly existence, the five khandhas, or the realm of rebirth, as opposed to Nibbāna.”³
- (iii) Commentaries speaking of three Māras specify them as Devaputtamāra, Maccumāra, and Kilesamāra. When four Māras are referred to, they appear to be the five Māras mentioned in (i) above less Devaputta Māra.

Malalasekera proceeds to attempt “a theory of Māra in Buddhism,” which he formulates in the following manner:

“The commonest use of the word was evidently in the sense of Death. From this it was extended to mean ‘the world under the sway of death’ (also called Māradheyya, e.g. AN IV 228) and the beings therein. Thence, the kilesas (defilements) also came to be called Māra in that they were instruments of Death, the causes enabling Death to hold sway over the world. All temptations brought about by the kilesas were likewise regarded as the work of Death. There was also evidently a legend of a devaputta of the Vasavatti world called Māra, who considered himself the head of the Kāmāvacara-world [the sensual realm] and who recognised any attempt to curb the enjoyment of sensual pleasures as a direct challenge to himself and to his authority. As time went on these different conceptions of the word became confused one with the other, but this confusion is not always difficult to unravel.”⁴

What follows from this statement, even though Malalasekera did not elucidate enough, is that the term Māra, when it occurs in Buddhist literature, could signify any one of the following four:

- (i) An anthropomorphic deity ruling over a heaven in the sensual sphere (kāmāvacara-devaloka), namely, Paranimmita-Vasavatti. He is meant when Māra is called kāmādhāturāja (the king of the sensual realm). In this position, he is as important and prestigious as Sakka and Mahābrahma in whose company he is often mentioned in the canonical literature. This Māra, or Māradevaputta, is not only a very powerful deity but is also bent on making life difficult for holy persons.
- (ii) The Canon also speaks of (a) Māras in the plural as a class of potent deities (e.g. in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) and (b) of previous—hence, logically future—Māras (e.g. in the Māratajjaniya Sutta). According to Tibetan texts, the Ascetic Siddhartha could have, with the instructions given by Ārāḍakālāma, become a Sakra, a Brahmā, or a Māra.⁵

¹G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names* (1937: reprint Luzac, London, 1960), 2:611.

²Ibid. The five terms mean: Māra as the five aggregates, Māra as the defilements, Māra as kammic constructions, Māra as Death, and Māra as a young deity. (Ed.)

³Malalasekera., 2:612.

⁴Ibid., 2:613.

- (iii) A personification of Death is called also the lord of death (Maccurāja), the exterminator (Antaka), the great king (mahārāja), and the inescapable (Namuci). The preoccupation of the Buddhist quest for deliverance is consistently stressed as escaping the phenomenon of death, which presupposes rebirth. The entire range of existence falls within the realm of Māra (Māradheyya) on account of the ineluctable presence of death. (Cf. Schopenhauer’s concept of “Morture.”⁶) All states of existence, including the six heavenly worlds of the sensual sphere, are said to return to the power of Māra, which means into the power of death.⁷
- (iv) Māra can also be seen as an allegorization, with almost immediate personification, of the power of temptation, the tendency towards evil, moral conflict, and the influence of such factors as indolence, negligence, and niggardliness. Similar to Satan in Judeo-Christian and Islamic thinking and Ahriman in Avestan thought, though in no way identical, this Māra is described as Pāpimā (i.e. the Evil One, or simply the Evil),⁸ Pamattabandhu (Kinsman of Dalliance), Pisuṇa (Calumnious or Malicious), and Kaṇha (the Black). Grimm calls this Māra “the prince and bestower of all worldly lust” and distinguishes him from Lucifer of the Bible on the ground that this personification “always remains apparent.”⁹

In this paper, where the Buddha’s encounters with Māra are analysed as they are presented in literature and art, the main concern will be with Māra as a personification of temptation (i.e. with (iv) above), but we will also briefly examine how the other concepts are sometimes subsumed under this, and how the literary description or the artistic representation of Māra is conditioned by the merger of three separate concepts as well as by the general body of Indian mythology. It has to be noted that Māra is another name for the Indian God of Love, known also as Kāma or Kāmadeva (Lust, or God of Lust), Manmatha (Tormentor of Minds), Anaṅga (Body-less), Kusumāyudha (Flower-weaponed), Pañcabāṇa (Of Five Arrows), and Makaradhvaṇa (Dragon-flagged).

II. Māra Legends in Canonical Texts

The Pāli Canon includes several accounts attributed to the Buddha himself on his quest for deliverance and these have obviously provided the raw material for the reconstruction of his biography. Among them, the most comprehensive as regards the details of the discipline and training which the Buddha followed is the Mahāsaccaka Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya (No. 36). It elaborates the circumstances leading to the renunciation, the Great Departure, as the term Abhinikkhamana is usually translated; the period of studentship under Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta; the austerities he practised for six years; the process of meditation and contemplation and the progressive spiritual attainments; and the final achievement of Enlightenment. The entire statement has a ring of authenticity—a purposeful recollection of the highlights of his life and career. But, as E.J. Thomas has pointed out, “the most remarkable feature in this recital is the entire absence of any temptation by Māra.”¹⁰

The same comment would also apply to the Bhayabherava Sutta (No. 4 of the Majjhima Nikāya), where the Buddha recounts the doubts and fears which he encountered in the days of his austerities in the forest. Nor does the Dvedhāvitakka Sutta (No. 19) of the same Nikāya, which analyses the Buddha’s thought process prior to the Enlightenment and how it led to his Enlightenment, digress from the philosophical treatment of the theme to refer to temptations by Māra. Thomas’s explanation is “that later authorities put additional events in different places.”¹¹ But a more reasonable

⁵W.W. Rockhill, *The Life of the Buddha and the Early History of His Order*—derived from the Tibetan Works in *Bkaḥ-hgyur* and *Bstan-hgyur* (1884: reprint Orientalia Indica, Delhi, 1972), p.27.

⁶George Grimm, *The Doctrine of the Buddha: The Religion of Reason and Meditation* (Akademie Verlag, Berlin, 1958), p.98.

⁷Bhikkhunī-saṃyutta, No. 7 (S I 133).

⁸Grimm, p.331.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰E.J. Thomas, *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 3rd ed., 1949), p.68. See too MN Suttas No. 26 (Ariyapariyesana), No. 85 (Bodhirājakumāra), and No. 100 (Saṅgārava).

¹¹Ibid., p.68.

explanation, to my mind, is that poetical imagery or allegorization is more the domain of poetry and hence not to be expected in prose sermons. That is precisely why almost all the accounts of Māra's temptations in the Pāli Canon are in verse, fully or partially, and the conversations with Māra invariably are recorded in verse.

The most important among them is the Padhāna Sutta in the Sutta-nipāta (vv. 425 ff.) of the Khuddaka Nikāya. Here, Māra is presented as Namuci and described as a person who approached the striving Bodhisatta speaking kind words (*karuṇaṃ vācaṃ bhāsamāno*). The words attributed to him are as follows:

“O you are thin and you are pale,
And you are in death's presence too;
A thousand parts are pledged to death,
But life still holds one part of you.
Live, Sir! Life is the better way;
You can gain merit if you live,
Come, live the Holy Life and pour
Libations on the holy fires,
And thus a world of merit gain.
What can you do by struggling now?
The path of struggling too is rough
And difficult and hard to bear.”¹²

The reply which the Buddha gave Māra has the makings of the entire concept of the allegorization or personification of temptation and psychological conflict. We find here all the ingredients which, in course of time, fired the imagination of countless writers, poets, painters, and sculptors all over Asia for over two millenia.¹³

The Buddha recognises the speaker of these “kind” words and is conscious of Māra's hidden agenda. So he rebukes him as Pamattabandhu (the Friend of Heedlessness), Pāpimā (the Evil One), and Kaṇha (the Black One). The hosts of Māra are also identified:

“Your first squadron is Sense-Desires,
Your second is called Boredom, then
Hunger and Thirst compose the third,
And Craving is the fourth in rank,
The fifth is Sloth and Torpor
While Cowardice lines up as sixth,
Uncertainty is seventh, the eighth
Is Malice paired with Obstinacy;
Gain, Honour and Renown, besides,
And ill-won Notoriety,
Self-praise and Denigrating Others:
These are your squadrons, Namuci.”¹⁴

Although the numbering of the “hosts” stops at eight, two more sets are identifiable. Thus the concept of ten “hosts” has also been established. Similarly conceived is Māra riding an elephant (*savāhana*), which could, of course, mean any ride—elephant, horse, or chariot—and arrayed for war with an army all around (*samantā dhajiniṃ disvā*).

The Buddha himself announces his readiness to give battle:

“None but the brave will conquer them
To gain bliss by the victory....
Better I die in battle now
Than choose to live on in defeat....

¹²Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, *The Life of the Buddha* (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, 1972), p.19.

¹³Malalasekera, 2:615: “Hence we have practically all the elements in the later elaborated versions.”

¹⁴Ñāṇamoli, p.20. (In line 5, “Sloth and Accidy” has been amended by me to “Sloth and Torpor.”)

I sally forth to fight, that I
May not be driven forth from my post."¹⁵

The Buddha's squadrons, however, are not named; but earlier, in listing the psychological defences he possessed against Māra's "kind" persuasive words, the Buddha had said:

"For I have faith (*saddhā*) and energy (*virīya*)
And I have wisdom (*paññā*) too."

Further to underline the psychological dimension of the battle, as conceived in this context, the Buddha proceeds to tell Māra:

"Your serried squadrons, which the world
With all its gods cannot defeat,
I shall now break with wisdom
As with a stone a clay pot."¹⁶

One element, however, is still not evident: Māra does not claim the seat on which the Bodhisatta is seated, and hence the need to call as witness the earth (or the earth-goddess, as the later versions have it) has not arisen. It may, nevertheless, be noted that the Buddha's reply assumes an effort on the part of Māra and his hosts to dislodge him from his position:

"I sally forth to fight, that I
May not be driven from my post
(*Mā maṃ ṭhānā acāvayi*)."

On the other hand, a further reason is given for the Buddha's determination to fight:

"From land to land I shall wander,
Training disciples far and wide."

This implies a further element in the legends of Māra's temptations, which are found in canonical texts as well as elsewhere relating to the obstacles he had tried to place on the Buddha's advent into his mission as a teacher.

Another pointer in the Padhāna Sutta to other legends is contained in the last three verses, which speak of a later encounter of Māra with the Buddha. Though Chalmers interprets this passage as a statement addressed to the Buddha,¹⁷ the accusative case Gotamaṃ in verse 24 indicates that it need not be so construed. Here, Māra says:

"For seven years I pursued the Buddha at every step
Yet with the wakeful Buddha I got no chance.
As a crow that hopped around a fat-coloured stone
Thinking 'we may find a tender delicacy'
Flies away in disappointment
In disgust I give up Gotama."¹⁸

The final verse of the sutta, which tradition assigns to the Buddha but which appears from the contents to be of much later origin than verses 1–20, shows the degree to which the personification of Māra had developed. Here, he is called '*dummano yakkho*,' a "disappointed sprite" (N.B. not Vasavatti-Māra, the devaputta) and is said to be so frustrated that his lute drops from his armpit. We shall return later to the implications of this reference to Māra as yakkha.

Altogether absent from the Padhāna Sutta is the episode with the daughters of Māra, who are elsewhere represented as tempting the Buddha with their charms after their father with all his hosts had failed. This story (S I 124ff.), along with several others, occurs in the Māra-saṃyutta of the

¹⁵Ibid., p.20.

¹⁶Ibid., p.21. I read the third line, *taṃ te paññāya bhecchāmi*. The reading *gacchāmi* is preferred by Helmer Smith, who also suggests *vechchāmi* (from the root *vyadh*).

¹⁷Lord Chalmers, *Buddha's Teachings being the Sutta Nipāta or Discourse Collection* (Harvard Oriental Series, Cambridge, 1932), pp.104–105.

¹⁸Ibid., p.105.

Samyutta Nikāya. The majority of these episodes do not fall within the category of temptations by Māra. They reflect mostly the hostility which Māra had to the Buddha's mission and consist largely of disturbances he had created in different guises—making noises, breaking things, disrupting sermons. It is Māra preventing the people from getting out of his clutches in the sense of escaping from Māradheyya. These, therefore, do not come in the category of temptations, the topic of this paper.

The Māra-samyutta, comprising twenty-five suttas, does contain a number of temptations in which the Buddha or a disciple is involved. Sutta No. 1 (S I 103) speaks of a moment when Māra became aware of a thought of the Buddha as regards his attainment of Enlightenment and approached him saying:

“You have forsaken the ascetic path
By means of which men purify themselves;
You are not pure, you fancy you are pure,
The path of purity is far from you.”¹⁹

In another sutta (No. 13, S I 110), when the Buddha was in pain on account of a foot injury, Māra addressed him in verse:

“What, are you stupefied, that you lie down?
Or else entranced by some poetic flight?
Are there not many aims you still must serve?
Why do you dream away intent on sleep
Alone in your secluded dwelling place?”²⁰

Again, Sutta No. 20 (S I 116) records an instance when the Buddha was debating in his mind whether it was possible to govern without killing and ordering execution, without confiscating and sequestering, without sorrowing and inflicting sorrow, in other words, righteously. Māra is said to have approached the Buddha and persuaded him to govern righteously. Apparently, the temptation here was for the Buddha to revert to lay life and resume a royal career so as to rescue those suffering from the cruelty of rulers.²¹

In each of these cases, the Buddha gives an apt reply, which convinces Māra that he has been recognised. Each discovery is concluded with the statement, “Sad and disappointed, Māra vanished.”

The Bhikkhūṇī-samyutta (S I 128ff.), in particular, gives ten similar accounts of temptations which bhikkhūṇīs had experienced in lonely places. Here, too, the statements, attributed to Māra or the bhikkhūṇī concerned, and often both, are in verse. For example, it was Kisāgotamī who was addressed thus by Māra:

“How now? Do you sit alone with tearful face
As mother stricken by the loss of child?
You who have plunged into the woods alone,
Is it a man that you have come to seek?”²²

She gives a reply. Māra knows that he has been found out and—as in the case of all similar episodes—vanishes from the place, unhappy and despondent. (Therīgāthā 182ff., 189, 196ff. contain similar dialogues with Māra.)

Into this same pattern falls the episode narrated in the Mahāvagga of the Vinaya Piṭaka (Vin I 20f.). When the Buddha was alone after he had sent out the first sixty disciples on missions to propagate the doctrine, Māra approached him saying:

“Bound art thou by all the snares,
Both those of devas and of men,
In great bondage art thou bound,

¹⁹Nāṇamoli, p.36.

²⁰Ibid., p.263.

²¹Malalasekera, 2:617.

²²Maurice Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. II (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1983), p.56.

Recluse, you won't be freed from me."

The Buddha bluntly contradicts him and Māra disappears.

The recurring idea behind all these episodes is that doubts, anxieties, and longings which arise in the lonely mind of the Buddha or a disciple are personified as Māra. With a firm resolve, they vanish, and that is what Māra's disappearance signifies.

Very different from all these suttas is the Māradhītu Sutta (S I 124ff.; No. 25), which starts with the story of the Padhāna Sutta and continues to describe how the vanquished Māra "sat down cross-legged on the ground not too far from the Blessed One, silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, with nothing to say, scraping the ground with a reed." The way the story is connected with the preceding sutta gives the impression that this incident takes place seven years after the Enlightenment, when all the efforts of Māra to discover the Buddha heedless had failed. The daughters of Māra inquire about their father's despondency and receive the reply:

"An Arahant sublime is in the world;
And when a man escapes from Māra's sphere
There are no wiles to lure him back again
By lust, and that is why I grieve so much."

What follows is pure allegory. The three daughters have apt names: Taṇhā (Craving), Arati (Boredom), and Ragā (Lechery). They conspire and, on the principle that "men's tastes vary," assume forms ranging from those of virgins to mature women. They display wiles by which any ordinary man's "heart would have burst or hot blood would have gushed from his mouth, or he would have gone mad or crazy or he would have shrivelled, dried up, and withered like a cut green rush." Unmoved by all their charms and wiles, the Buddha rejects them with a series of well-chosen similes:

"Fools, you have tried to split a rock
By poking it with lily stems;
To dig a hill out with your nails;
To chew up iron with your teeth;
To find a footing on a cliff
With a great stone upon your head;
To push a tree down with your chest."²³

What all these Māra legends in the canonical texts establish beyond any doubt is that the allegorization of temptations had commenced very early in Buddhist circles. The imagery of a personified Māra accompanied by a tenfold army and supported by three daughters could even have originated with the Buddha himself. As suggestive imagery, it must have epitomised what most of the Buddha's disciples and followers had subjectively experienced "with wavering faith" when "the sweet delights of home and love, the charms of wealth and power, began to show themselves with attractive colours."²⁴ While they were perpetuated in poetry, no one took them literally. As Malalasekera says with reference to the Buddha's victory over Māra, "That this account of Buddha's struggle with Māra is literally true, none but the most ignorant of the Buddhists believe, even at the present day."²⁵

But that does not mean there had been no confusion. With the four concepts of Māra, outlined in the introduction to this paper, such confusions were quite commonplace. For example, even Buddhaghosa could not distinguish between the allegorical Māra and the Māradevaputta. With regard to the seven year surveillance of the Buddha by Māra in No. 24 of the Māra-saṃyutta, he says that Māradevaputta, having failed to see any lapse on the part of the Buddha over this period, came to him and worshipped him. Despite the lack of clarity, Māra was already a full-fledged concept by the time the Pāli Canon was completed in its present form.

²³Ñāṇamoli, p.64.

²⁴From Rhys Davids' article on Buddha in Encyclopaedia Britannica, quoted in Malalasekera, 2:615.

²⁵Ibid., 2:614.

III. Temptations by Māra in Non-canonical Buddhist Literature

As the biography of the Buddha came to be presented systematically, temptations by Māra began to figure as a major element in relation to several decisive steps taken by the Buddha. A number of such occasions representing critical points in the career before and immediately after the Enlightenment had been identified by the time the introduction to the Jātaka Commentary was composed.

This introduction, which contains perhaps the oldest continuous life story of the Buddha, mentions six such occasions:

- (i) At the time of the renunciation, when Māra is represented as trying to persuade the future Buddha to return home on the ground that he would, in seven days, become a universal monarch (cakkavatti mahārāja).
- (ii) During the period of austerity, when the future Buddha was in a very weak condition and Māra approached urging him to give up the struggle.
- (iii) On the eve of the attainment of Buddhahood, when Māra is said to have come with his hosts and challenged the future Buddha's right to his seat. This is the occasion of the great victory over Māra symbolising the Enlightenment.
- (iv) During the fourth week after the Enlightenment, when Māra is presented discouraging the Buddha from preaching: "If you have realised the safe path to immortality, go your way alone by yourself. Why do you want to admonish others?" It is when Māra failed in this effort that his three daughters, Taṇhā, Arati, and Ragā stepped in.²⁶
- (v) Just after the first sixty disciples were sent out on missions, when Māra is shown trying to convince the Buddha that he had really not attained liberation.
- (vi) Just before the Buddha met the thirty Bhaddavaggiya young men, when Māra is presented again as challenging the Buddha's Enlightenment.

It should be noted that other encounters individually described in the Māra-saṃyutta are not included in this list, possibly because they were not connected with any important event or decision in the life of the Buddha. Also to be stressed is the fact that the list is at variance with the information given elsewhere in the Pāli Canon.

Not all biographies of the Buddha agree with this list, or with the timing of the encounters, or with the words or actions attributed to Māra. The Lalitavistara, though a later Buddhist Sanskrit work, appears to have been based either on the introduction to the Jātaka Commentary or on an earlier source. As such, the divergences other than in regard to poetic exaggerations and greater emphasis on the supernatural aspects are minimal. One important variation in the Lalitavistara is that "Māra, the wicked one, closely followed the Bodhisattva for six years as he was practising austerities seeking and pursuing an entrance." Such a long period of surveillance suggests the function of Māradevaputta (i.e. a living being such as a deity) rather than an encounter explainable in allegorical terms. Another departure is that the daughters of Māra try to tempt the Buddha under the Bodhi-tree, and their names are Rati, Arati, and Trṣṇā.²⁷ Whereas the Pāli sources say that the vanquished Māra drew lines on the ground with a stick or a reed, the Lalitavistara states that Māra wrote the words "the ascetic Gotama will escape from my realm."

The version which reveals some very significant departures is the life of the Buddha recorded in the Tibetan texts. As far as Rockhill's selective translation of the relevant material in the Dulva shows, five points have to be noted:

²⁶Compare with Māra-saṃyutta Nos. 24–25 where this event is said to have taken place seven years after the Enlightenment. Aśvaghōṣa in his *Buddha-carita* (Chap. XV) dates it in the fourth week, as does the Avidūre Nidāna of the Jātaka.

²⁷Spence Hardy and Bigandet, basing their works on Sinhala and Burmese traditions, have these names as Taṇhā, Rati, and Raṅga; Rockhill, p.31.

- (i) Māra has made no effort to dissuade the future Buddha at the time of his renunciation.
- (ii) As the hour of Enlightenment approached, Māra went to the future Buddha saying, “Devadatta has subdued Kapilavastu; he has seized the palace and has crushed the Mākyaas.” He had also caused apparitions of Yasodharā, Mṛgajā,²⁸ Gopā, Devadatta, and other Mākyaas to appear. What followed was only an argument in which Māra failed to convince the future Buddha. Apparently, the imagery of a great war ending with victory over Māra does not figure in this account.
- (iii) When Māra failed to prevail, his daughters, who are differently named as Desire, Pleasure, and Delight, tried all their allurements in vain.
- (iv) When the Enlightenment was attained, Māra’s bow and standard fell from his grasp and all his cohorts, a million and thirty-six thousand in number, fled, filled with dismay.
- (v) When the Buddha was suffering from a colic after partaking of the honey offered by the two merchants, Māra informs the Buddha that it was time to die. But the Buddha indicates his intention to live until the faith is well founded.²⁹

The Chinese Abhinīṣkramaṇa Sūtra has a few more variations. For instance, it says that Māra brought a bundle of official notices purporting to be from Mākya princes to dissuade the future Buddha from continuing with his quest for deliverance.³⁰

Whether as a conscious effort in rationalising this diversity of information or as a result of concentrating on the most dramatic instances when the Buddha encountered temptations, three events gained in popularity: namely, the Renunciation or Great Departure; the Victory over Māra, described either as Māravijaya or Mārayuddha (Vanquishing of Māra, or the Battle with Māra); and the Temptation by Māra’s daughters. Each incident acquired embellishments at the hands of poets and creative writers until by about the first century B.C. a number of elements had firmly taken root:

- (i) Renunciation: Māra appears in the air and talks of the imminent receipt by the future Buddha of the gem-set wheel of Universal Monarchy. When rejected, Māra disappears vowing to keep an eye on him like an omnipresent shadow. When the future Buddha wishes to turn back and see his city, the earth obliges by turning itself around like a potter’s wheel.
- (ii) Victory over Māra: Māra rides the elephant called Girimekhalā and assaults the future Buddha along with ten squadrons or “hosts”; Māra assumes a fearsome guise with a thousand arms; his army too assumes fearsome forms and makes eerie noises to generate fear; rain, hail, showers of fire, thunder, and an earthquake are also used in the process; his final weapon is his disc which fails to harm the future Buddha; Māra’s last step is to challenge the future Buddha’s right to the seat on which he is seated; the earth is summoned as a witness; the earth quakes and Māra and his hosts run in disarray. Māra is dejected and begins to draw lines or scribble on the ground.
- (iii) Temptation by Māra’s daughters: They are three in number; they seek to lure the Buddha some time after his Enlightenment; they use dance, song, music, and sweet talk as their arsenal to generate lust in the Buddha’s mind; the Buddha shows not the slightest interest; they fail.

These basic elements are observable both in literature and art. The second and the third have, of course, become more popular as themes for graphic description in prose or verse as well as for imaginative representation in sculpture and painting.

Among the earliest poems on these themes is Aśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita* (circa 2nd century A.C.), which devotes two chapters to the Victory over Māra (Chapter 13) and the Temptation by Māra’s daughters (Chapter 15). Already new elements had begun to appear. Māra comes not only with three daughters (named here Rati, Prīti, and Tṛṣṇā) but also with three sons—Vibrama (Confusion), Harṣa (Gaiety), and Darpa (Pride). Of course, Māra himself is represented as an enemy of the perfect Dharma (Saddharmaripu) and is actually called Kāmadeva, the God of Love:

²⁸Mṛgajā is the name in Sanskrit sources for Kisāgotamī of the Pāli sources. It is she who uttered the lines ‘*Nibbutā nūna sā mātā*’.

²⁹Rockhill, pp.27–34.

³⁰Samuel Beal, *The Romantic Legend of Sakya Buddha* (London, 1875), p.207.

“He whom they call in the world Kāmadeva, the owner of the various weapons, the flower-arrowed, the lord of the course of desire—it is he whom they also style Māra, the enemy of liberation.”³¹

In the typical style of this Indian Cupid, the first weapons used are the five flower-arrows. When they fail, Māra thinks: “He is not worthy of my flowershaft nor my arrow ‘gladdener,’ nor the sending of my daughter Rati (to tempt him); he deserves the alarms and rebukes and blows from all the gathered hosts of demons.” Thus he summoned his army of animal-faced and hideous monsters, which Aśvaghōṣa describes conjuring many a grotesque appearance. Their collective assault on the future Buddha finds lively description in as many as twenty-three verses. The reaction of the future Buddha is his resolute steadfastness and an admonition to Māra to desist from his futile effort:

“Give not way, then, to grief but put on calm, let not your greatness, O Māra, be mixed with pride; it is not well to be confident—fortune is unstable—why do you accept a position on a tottering base?”³²

The description of the encounter ends with the following four verses:

70. Having listened to his words, and having seen the unshaken firmness of the great saint, Māra departed dispirited and broken in purpose with those very arrows by which, O world, you are smitten in your heart;

71. With their triumph at an end, their labour all fruitless, and all their stones, straw, and trees thrown away, that host of his fled in all directions, like some hostile army when its camp has been destroyed by the enemy.

72. When the flower-armed god thus fled away vanquished with his hostile forces and the passionless sage remained victorious, having conquered all the power of darkness, the heavens shone out with the moon like a maiden with a smile, and a sweet-smelling shower of flowers fell down wet with dew.

73. When the wicked one thus fled vanquished, the different regions of the sky grew clear, the moon shone forth, showers of flowers fell down from the sky upon the earth and the night gleamed out like a spotless maiden.³³

There is no reference to either the ten squadrons of Māra or the matching armies, in the form of the recollection of the Ten Perfections (*Pāramitā*) by the future Buddha. Nor is the question of the right to the seat raised or the earth summoned as a witness.

As writer after writer vied with one another to present the momentous struggle of the Buddha in his endeavour to attain Enlightenment, new details were added and new imagery created. Right down to the modern writers and poets in Buddhist countries, particularly Sri Lanka, Burma, and Thailand, the process has continued. The licence which they continue to exercise is an indication, by itself, that what is elaborated is an allegory, a symbolic representation of an inner conflict and crisis, and not an historical event. The writers or the artists are not meddling with facts and misrepresenting history but are sharpening their own conception and appreciation of the most critical experience of a man who transcended himself.

Aśvaghōṣa takes up the episode of Māra’s daughters in Chapter 15. The Buddha has passed four weeks since the Enlightenment and Māra comes to him saying, “O holy one, be pleased to enter Nirvāṇa, your desires are accomplished.” The Buddha’s response being negative, Māra becomes despondent and the daughters take upon themselves the task of luring the Buddha. What follows, in contrast to the Victory over Māra, is a tame dialogue between the Buddha and each of the daughters. The whole theme is disposed of in twelve verses and the girls end up by professing to be the Buddha’s disciples.

This episode, too, underwent embellishment and elaboration. Earlier Pāli sources as well as the *Lalitavistara* had given an indication of the potential which the theme has both in descriptive poetry

³¹E.B. Cowell (tr.), *The Buddhacarita or Life of Buddha by Aśvaghōṣa* (Cosmo, New Delhi, 1977) p.137.

³²Ibid., p.146.

³³Ibid., p.147.

and graphic art. Poets in several languages have succeeded in conjuring up scenes of singing and dancing of three damsels in seductive postures.

According to the tenets of Oriental poetry, a great poem has to evoke a range of emotions among which heroism and eroticism have been especially sought after. The Victory over Māra and the Temptation by Māra's daughters provided the basis for many a creative effort, in rendering a more balanced character, in terms of the tenets of ornate poetry, to poems on the Buddha which could otherwise be humdrum or deeply philosophical. Whether this was permissible had been a question which the Buddhist writers had grappled with from the days of Aśvaghōṣa. But the fact that the themes have been widely, if not entirely, viewed as symbolic and allegorical have all alone ensured a very high degree of liberty in artistic expression. This is what the far-flung representations of these themes in sculpture and painting demonstrate even more convincingly.

IV. Māra Episodes in Asian Buddhist Art

Even before the Buddha came to be represented in human form, the Great Departure and Victory over Māra had become popular themes depicted at both Sanchi and Amaravati.

Sculptures on the gateways of the Great Stupa at Sanchi (first century B.C.) include a scene of the Great Departure³⁴ and two scenes of Māra's Assault (north gateway) and Defeat (west gateway).³⁵ A riderless horse (repeated four times) represents the future Buddha (symbolised by the royal parasol) leaving the city in the company of countless gods in a mood of jubilation. None of the figures can, however, be identified as Māra. Apparently, the panel does not represent Māra's temptation. But, as described in the Lalitavistara and Aśvaghōṣa's Buddhacarita, the horse is borne on the hands of yakṣas or deities.

In the panels depicting the assault and defeat of Māra, the future Buddha is represented by an empty seat under the Bodhi-tree. Māra himself is shown in one as a stately figure, a veritable god, reflecting Aśvaghōṣa's identification of Māra as Kāmadeva, the Indian God of Love. This figure is characteristically handsome, whereas his hosts in both panels are grotesque in size and appearance.

In the assault scene, they make hideous faces and are apparently jeering and shouting. In the defeat scene they are despondent and retreating in disarray. As Māra's hosts retreat on the right-hand half of the panel, the rejoicing deities are shown approaching the Bodhi-tree from the left. Apparently, it is Māra who, with bow in hand, rides the elephant. In neither is there any overt depiction of the temptation by Māra's daughters, unless the two female figures at the left-hand corner of the assault scene are meant to suggest it; but this appears most unlikely.

Among the Amaravati sculptures of the second century A.C. are two scenes depicting the Great Departure³⁶ and Māra's Assault.³⁷ In the first, a riderless horse, above whom is held the royal insignia of a parasol, is carried on the hands of squatting dwarf figures. Here, again, the encounter with Māra is not represented. With the characteristic phenomenon of horror vacui in the sculptures of this period, the panel is crowded with rejoicing deities, one of them in a dancing pose. Even in the damaged state, the panel on Māra's Assault gives the impression of the dynamism that the sculptor

³⁴Anil de Silva-Vigier, *The Life of the Buddha retold from Ancient Sources* (Phaidon, London, 1955), plate 69. The riderless horses (four moving towards the right and one moving in the opposite direction) represent action as is usual in the synoptic technique of storytelling in ancient Buddhist sculpture. The horses going to the right are represented as carrying the Bodhisatta, whose presence is symbolised by a royal parasol held above them. The returning horse is led by a sorrowing Channa.

³⁵Heinrich Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia: Its Mythology and Transformation* (Bollingen Series No. 29; Pantheon, New York, 1955), plate 12, north gate rear view central architrave; Anil de Silva-Vigier, plate 69. The majestic seated figure (slightly off the centre to the left) could be that of Māra, conceived, as Aśvaghōṣa did, as the Indian God of Love. This panel depicts the Assault and is dated by some art critics to the early first century B.C. The scene of Māra's Defeat is found on the west gateway. Sir John Marshall, *The Buddhist Art of Gandhāra* (Department of Archaeology of Pakistan, Cambridge, 1960), fig. 7. Māra could be the figure on the elephant holding a bow—again symbolising the God of Love by his traditional weapon.

³⁶Zimmer, plate 89.

³⁷Ibid., plate 88.

had intended to convey. The hosts of Māra are depicted with various weapons raised ready to attack, while Māra himself appears to be the seated figure to the left of the empty seat under the Bodhi-tree. Here too Māra is a handsome god in princely attire. This panel seems to combine synoptically three events: the Assault, the Defeat of Māra, and the Temptation by Māra's daughters: note the dancing figure on the right.

It is in Gandhara art that we notice a further development of the two themes and the emergence of the scene depicting the Temptation by Māra's daughters. A sculpture in the Lahore Museum³⁸ shows the future Buddha riding a horse. Around him are depicted two of the four sights which prompted the renunciation: namely, old age and death. A princely figure with a halo, standing in the left corner of the panel, could be Māra, and the wheel-like object at the right upper corner could be the symbol of Universal Monarchy, of which Māra apprised the future Buddha. The scene includes symbolically a third element, the role of the earth, represented as a female figure emerging from the ground, in enabling the future Buddha to take a last look at his city without turning back. Not only do we see here the story of the Great Departure in all its traditional details, but also the continuing representation of Māra as a devaputta. The halo here is particularly suggestive. Another fragment of a Gandhara sculpture appears to be a Great Departure panel.³⁹ Here, again, the earth-goddess emerges from the ground and bears upon her shoulders the feet of the horse. The two standing figures have been identified by Grunwedel as guards. But there is also the likelihood that the one in front with the bow in hand is Māra. Hence this panel, too, might be a representation of this encounter.

The representation of Māra in Gandhara sculpture has been discussed at length by Grunwedel. He says: "Māra rarely if ever appears in Buddhist sculptures except in the representations of the temptation scene.... Though different sculptors may have taken their own ways of representing Māra, still there was a fixed type also for this deva. He appears, at a later date, in full festal attire, youthful in figure, with bow and arrow.... His attributes, bow and arrow and Makara, suggest that there is some connection with Greek Eros."⁴⁰

He had further attempted to identify as Māra a figure, earlier considered to be Devadatta, in a sculpture depicting the Kāśyapa legend, which is now in the Lahore Museum.⁴¹ This figure occurs in another sculpture in the Lahore Museum, which depicts the hosts of Māra.⁴² An Indianized version of the figure appears in the relief from Lorian Tangai in the Calcutta Museum.⁴³

Two Gandhara sculptures of Māra's Assault show further developments in the treatment of the subject. In the Mardan sculpture (now in the Peshawar Museum)⁴⁴ the characteristic posture of touching the earth in summoning it to witness (i.e. *bhūmi-sparśa-mudrā*) has already come into existence and the defeat of Māra's host is symbolised by a crouching and a wailing figure (reduced in scale) in front of the future Buddha. The sculpture at the Boston Fine Arts Museum⁴⁵ depicts in great detail the symbolic crouching and falling figures.

The exact composition and details of Gandhara art, with pronouncedly Indian countenances, are to be found in the later sculptures of Amaravati and Nagarjunikonda. But the temptation scene of Māra's daughters gradually asserts a prominence in artistic representation. The defeated hosts of Māra depicted in reduced scale crouching in front of the Buddha's seat⁴⁶ are overshadowed by the dancing female figures in the seductive "half bent" pose (*ardhabhaṅga*). (See the upper frieze of the slab depicting the stūpa at Amaravati.⁴⁷)

³⁸A. Grunwedel, *Buddhist Art in India* (London, 1901), p.98; illustration 50.

³⁹Ibid., p.99; illustration 51.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp.92, 94.

⁴¹Ibid., p.88; fig. 5 in illustration 42.

⁴²Ibid., p.96; illustration 48.

⁴³Ibid., p.101; illustration 53.

⁴⁴Marshall, plate 43; fig. 67.

⁴⁵Ibid., plate 44; fig. 68.

⁴⁶Zimmer, plate 92 (b). Note the lower square represents the Great Departure. See also *The Way of the Buddha* (Government of India, Delhi, 1955), plate 52 (Nagarjunikonda).

⁴⁷Ibid., plate 96. In both examples from Amaravati, the Buddha is depicted with the *abhaya-mudrā* rather than with the *bhūmi-sparśa-mudrā*.

The finest combination of the attack by the hideous hosts of Māra and the temptation by Māra's daughters is to be found in Ajanta (c. 600 A.C.), both in a painting in Cave 1 and in a sculptured version in Cave 26.⁴⁸ Apart from their artistic merits the composition has demonstrated how this could be extended to massive dimensions. Examples come from far-flung places like Tun-huang in China⁴⁹ and Dambulla⁵⁰ and Hindagala⁵¹ in Sri Lanka. At Dambulla the entire ceiling of the largest cave is devoted to the theme of Māra's Assault, bringing together many characteristics that had been progressively incorporated in the artistic representation of this event.

A curiously interesting piece of art comes from Qyzyl in Chinese Turkistan.⁵² A fresco depicting how the death of the Buddha was announced to King Ajātasattu shows a painting on cloth of major events in the Buddha's life. On the left upper corner is Māra's Assault, represented in miniature with tremendous economy of space and figures but with a telling effect. In a tenth century fresco of Tun-huang⁵³ is a highly Sinocized version of Māra's Assault, but Māra's hosts have been represented as described in literature. The two fully dressed Chinese damsels standing by the seat of the future Buddha could be two of Māra's daughters. If they are in the process of luring the ascetic, they seem to be doing so only by song! The imposing figure of a Chinese warlord, standing behind them, could be Māra himself.

In Borobudur,⁵⁴ we see the continuation of the Indian tradition of sculpture, and the panels depicting Māra's Assault and the Temptation by Māra's daughters reflect the Lalitavistara accounts most faithfully. Of special interest is the representation of Māra with his thousand arms, wielding a bow. The theme persists in Southeast Asia. From Angkor Thom⁵⁵ comes a relief which depicts not an attack on the person of the future Buddha as elsewhere, but a war between two armies: the hosts of Māra pitted against the army of pāramitās of the Buddha. A book cover⁵⁶ from Nepal depicts the daughters of Māra in demure poses and a wood carving of the 16th century⁵⁷ shows the future Buddha in the bhūmisparśa-mudrā, the earth-touching posture, surrounded by the hosts of Māra.

In a gradual process to abstract representation of Māra's Assault, the bhūmi-sparśa-mudrā becomes a short-hand way of recalling the event. From Pagan⁵⁸ comes an example where the additional element of the Temptation by Māra's daughters is portrayed discreetly on the pedestal with three dancing girls and two playing musical instruments. Perhaps the same interpretation would apply to the Nālandā sculpture in which three female figures on the pedestal have grotesque faces, possibly suggesting the association of Māra as a yakṣa or demon.⁵⁹ But the three female figures do not appear in all cases. The Buddha statue in the earth-touching posture (as in the case of the one from Bihar of the 8th or 9th century)⁶⁰ ultimately becomes identified as one of the Dhyāni Buddhas of the Mahāyāna tradition with the specific name Akṣobhya, meaning imperturbable—an instance where

⁴⁸Anil de Silva-Vigier, plates 71 and 72. No figure is readily identifiable as that of Māra, though he may be the imposing figure holding a sword, to the Buddha's right, or the one to the left with a swaying mace in hand.

⁴⁹Basil Gray, *Buddhist Cave Paintings at Tun-Huang* (Faber and Faber, London, 1959), plate 19, which gives a detail from a mural in Cave 254 (dated 475–500 A.C.). Māra is represented as an imposing personage, i.e. a devaputta with a halo, to the left of the Buddha.

⁵⁰The ceiling painting at Dambulla is of such dimensions as to preclude the possibility of a photographic reproduction. The current efforts under the Sri Lanka Unesco Cultural Triangle Programme to document the cave paintings of Dambulla are expected to enable this important painting to be reproduced for wider appreciation.

⁵¹Jean Boisselier, *Ceylon (Archaeologia Mundi*, Nagel, Geneva), plate 78. Māra is depicted as a demon with many arms, riding a multitusked elephant.

⁵²Zimmer, plate 612.

⁵³Anil de Silva-Vigier, plate 73.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, plate 68, and Zimmer, plate 486 (b).

⁵⁵David L. Snellgrove (ed.), *The Image of the Buddha* (Vikas/Unesco, New Delhi, 1978), p.329; plate 252.

⁵⁶W. Zwalf, *Buddhism: Art and Faith* (British Museum, London, 1985) p.119, plate 172.

⁵⁷Snellgrove, p.347, plate 272.

⁵⁸Zimmer, plate 471 (d).

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, plate 380.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, plate 381.

the quality of steadfastness which the temptations of Māra brought out in the Buddha becomes personified as a separate entity.⁶¹

Just as the mode of presentation of the Temptation scenes underwent change over the centuries, the concept of Māra too changed in the eyes of the people. As late as the eleventh century, Sri Lankan Buddhists—as seen from a representation of vanquished and retreating Māra in the murals of the Mahiyangana Stūpa relic chamber—seemed to have considered Māra to be a devaputta, a god.⁶² But as time went on, he came to be depicted exactly like his hideous-looking hosts and his god-like appearance was replaced by what was traditionally ascribed to a yakṣa or demon.⁶³ This change is further seen on the cover of an ola book which depicts Māra not in a temptation scene but in a Jātaka.⁶⁴ The prevalence of this concept is further attested by examples from Thailand where a picture of the Great Departure drawn in the eighteenth century represents Māra as a demon.⁶⁵ The final evolution of Māra's transformation may perhaps be seen in the Tibetan Yamāntaka, who is iconographically represented as a fierce looking demon with multiple arms.⁶⁶

V. Conclusion

This examination reveals that the temptations of Māra as allegorical representations of the mental torment, conflict, and crisis experienced by the Buddha as well as his disciples are as old as Buddhism itself and the imagery could have originated in the Buddha's own graphic poetical expressions. The early compilers of the life of the Buddha did not make a conscious effort to deal systematically with individually recorded instances of such temptations. As such, there is a fair amount of confusion as regards the nature and the timing of the related events. Eventually, however, the Great Departure, the Victory over Māra, and the Temptation by Māra's daughters came to be singled out for detailed treatment in literature and art. Embellishments and variations were freely allowed according to the writer's or artist's conception of the situation, as the allegorical aspect was considered the more significant. The historical or factual aspect of the related events was secondary and the diversity of presentation made a definite contribution to the enrichment of both literary and artistic creativity.

What both literature and art show very clearly is that Māra's personality as conceived by Buddhist writers and artists underwent a marked change with the spread of Buddhist culture. In India, in earlier times, Māra was yet a devaputta, in fact the handsome God of Love with all his traditional characteristics. Later on, closer to modern times, in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia, he becomes more and more pronouncedly demonic.

This analysis has been limited to those of Māra's encounters with the Buddha which have a predominant character of temptation, i.e. where Māra is allegorized and personified. Other aspects of Māra as a devaputta and a personification of death await similar analysis. An effort made in this direction could be invaluable especially to answer the many questions which Malalasekera had raised in his article in the *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*.⁶⁷

⁶¹Snellgrove: "Thus often only an inscription or a still living Buddhist tradition in the places where archaeological pieces are found can distinguish ... a Sākyamuni in his victory over Māra (Māravijaya) from Akṣobhya." See plates 206, 207, 208, and 210 (pp. 278–280). Plate 206 is significant in that the Buddha is crowned to distinguish him as the supreme Buddha.

⁶²D.B. Dhanapala: *The Story of Sinhalese Painting* (Saman, Maharagama, undated), p.23 (explanation on p.18).

⁶³Siri Gunasinghe, *An Album of Buddhist Paintings from Sri Lanka (Ceylon)—Kandyan Period* (National Museum, Colombo, 1978), plate 39. Also see Boisselier, plate 78.

⁶⁴Zwalf, plate 217, p.155.

⁶⁵Grunwedel, p.102; illustration 54.

⁶⁶Zimmer, plates 603 and 605.

⁶⁷See in particular Malalasekera, 2:615, 618, and 619.

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