

## THE BUDDHA'S ENCOUNTERS WITH MĀRA, THE TEMPTER: THEIR REPRESENTATION IN LITERATURE AND ART

### I. Introduction

It was G.P. Malalasekera who introduced Māra in the Dictionary of Pali Proper Names as “generally regarded as the personification of Death, the Evil One, the Tempter (the Buddhist counterpart of the Devil or Principle of Destruction)” and stated: “The legends concerning Māra are, in the books, very involved and defy at unravelling them”<sup>1</sup>.

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

(i) “In the latest accounts, mention is made of five Māras — *Khandha-Māra*, *Kilesa-Māra*, *Abhisankhāra-Mārā*, *Maccumāra* and *Devaputta-Māra*; elsewhere Māra is spoken of as one, three or four”<sup>2</sup>.

(ii) “The term Māra, in the older books, is applied to the whole of the worldly existences, the five *khandhas*, or the realm of rebirth, as opposed to *Nibbāṇa*”<sup>3</sup>.

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1. G.P. MALALASEKERA, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, Luzas & Co., London (first published, 1937), 1960, p. 611.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 611.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 612.

(iii) Commentaries speaking of three Māras specify them as *Devaputta-Māra*, *Maccu-Māra* and *Kilesa-Māra*. When four Māras are referred to, they appear to be the five Māras, mentioned in (i) above – less *Devaputta-Māra*.

Thence, Malalasekera proceeded to attempt “a theory of Māra in Buddhism,” which he formulated 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., A. 228) and the beings therein. Thence, the *kilesas* also came to be called 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 and who recognized 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 conception of the world became confused one with the other, but this confusion is not always difficult to unravel”<sup>4</sup>.

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 following four:

(i) An anthropomorphic deity ruling over the heaven in the sensual sphere (*kāmāvacaradevaloka*) – namely, *Paranimmita-Vasavatti*. He is meant when Māra is called *Kāmadhātu rājā* (the king of the sensual elements). 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 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. *Dhammacakkappavattana-Sutta*) and (b) of previous – hence, logically future – Māras (e.g. *Māratajjaniya Sutta*). According to Tibetan texts, the Ascetic Siddhārtha could have, with

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 613 (Abbreviation A. in the quotation is for the Anguttara-Nikāya).

the instructions given by Ālāra Kālāma, become a Sakra, a Brahma or a Māra<sup>5</sup>.

(iii) A personification of Death called also the lord of death (*Maccurājā*) the exterminator (*Antaka*), the great king (*Maharāja*) 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"<sup>6</sup> S.V, 7 referring to all states of existences including the six heavenly worlds of the sensual sphere says that all return to the power of Māra which means into the power of death<sup>7</sup>.

(iv) 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, 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. Evil One or simply the Evil)<sup>8</sup> *Pamattabandhu* (friend of negligence or heedlessness), *Pisuna* (Calumnious or malicious) and *Kaṇha* (black). Grimm calls this Māra "the prince and bestower of all worldly lust" and contrasts him from Lucifer of the Bible on the ground that this personification "always remains apparent"<sup>9</sup>.

In this paper where the Buddha's encounters with Māra are analysed as they are presented in literature and art, our concern will be mainly with Māra as a personification of temptation (i.e. iv above). But we will also examine how the other two concepts are sometimes subsumed under this and how the literary description or the artistic

5. W.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*, (first published 1884), Oriental Indica, Delhi, 1972, p. 27.

6. GEORGE GRIMM, *The Doctrine of the Buddha – The Religion of Reason and Meditation*, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, 1958, p. 98.

7. Abbreviation S. refers to the *Saṃyutta-Nikāya* and the numbers which follow indicate the *Saṃyutta* and the *Sutta*.

8. GRIMM, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

9. *Ibid.*

representation of Māra is conditioned by the larger of three separate concepts as well as of 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) *Ananga* (Body-less), *Kusumāyudha* (flower-weaponed) and *Makaradhvajā* (dragon-flagged).

## II. *Māra Legends in Canonical Texts*

In the Canon are several accounts attributed to the Buddha himself on his quest for Deliverance and these obviously have provided the basic 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*. It elaborates the circumstances leading to the renunciation – the Great Departure, as the term *Abhinikkhamana* is usually translated, the period of studentship under *Ālāra Kālāma* and *Uddakarāmaputta*, the austerities he practised for six years, the process of meditation and contemplation and the progressive achievement of enlightenment. The entire statement has a ring of authenticity of a purposeful recollection of the highlights of one's 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"<sup>10</sup>.

The same comment would also apply to the *Bhayabherava-Sutta* also of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, where he recounts his doubts and fears which he encountered in the days of his austerities in the forest. Nor does the *Dvedhāvitakka-Sutta* 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 temptation by Māra. Thomas' explanation is "that

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10. E.J. THOMAS, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, (first edition 1927), third edition, 1949, p. 68. Cf. also the *Suttas* No. 26 *Ariyapariyesena*, No. 85 *Bodhirājakumāra* and No. 100 *Sangārava*.



later authorities put additional events in different places"<sup>11</sup>. But a more reasonable explanation, to our 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 accounts of Māra's temptations in the Pali 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* 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"<sup>12</sup>.

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 of all over Asia for over two millennia. (cf. Malalasekera "Here we have practically all the elements in the later elaborated versions")<sup>13</sup>.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

12. BHIKKHU NĀNAMOLI, *The Life of the Buddha*, Buddhist Publications Society, Kandy, 1972, p. 19.

13. MALALASEKERA, *op. cit.*, p. 615.

The Buddha recognizes the speaker of these kind words and is conscious of Māra's hidden agenda. So; he is rebuked as *Pamattabandhu*, *pāpima* (Evil one, the friend of heedlessness) and *Kaṇha* (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”<sup>14</sup>.

Although the numbering of the “hosts” stop at eight, two more sets are identifiable. Thus the concept of ten “hosts” has also been established. Similarly conceived is Māra riding an elephant (*Savāhanaṃ*, which could, of course, mean any ride - elephant, horse or chariot) and arrayed for war (*Samantadhajiniṃ yuttaṃ*).

The Buddha himself announces his readiness to war: —

“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.

\* \* \*

I sally forth to fight, that I  
May not be driven forth from my post”<sup>15</sup>.

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14. NĀNAMOLI, *op. cit.*, p. 20 (In line 5, ‘Sloth and Accidy’ has been amended by me to ‘Sloth and Torpor’).

15. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

The Buddha's squadrons are, however, not named; but earlier in listing the psychological differences he possessed against the kind words of persuasion of Māra, the Buddha has 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  
(*tam te paññāya vecchāmi*)  
As with a stone a clay pot"<sup>16</sup>.

One element, however, is still not too clearly evident: Māra does not claim the seat on which the Bodhisatta was 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 post or place:

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

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

*Raṭṭhaṃ raṭṭhaṃ vicarissaṃ  
Sāvake vinayaṃ puthu*

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

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16. *Ibid.*, p. 21 (Slightly modified by me).

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 are contained in the last three verses which speak of a later encounter of Māra with the Buddha. Though Chalmers<sup>17</sup> interprets this passage as a statement addressed to the Buddha, 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”<sup>18</sup>.

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 further. Here, he is called *dummano yakkho*, a disappointed *yakkha* (N.B. not Vasavatti-Māra, the *devaputta*) and is pictured as letting his lute drop from his armpit. We shall return later to the implications of this portrayal of Māra as a demon.

But altogether absent from the *Padhāna-Sutta* is the episode of the daughters of Māra who are represented as tempting the Buddha with their charms whereas their father failed with all his hosts. This story (S.IV,24) along several others occur in the *Samyutta-Nikāya* wherein the fourth section is actually called the *Māra-samyutta*. But 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 physically created in different guises, making noises, breaking things,

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17. Lord CHALMERS, *Buddha's Teaching – being the Sutta Nipāta or Discourse-Collection*, HOS 37, Harvard, Cambridge, 1932, pp. 104-105.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

disrupting sermons. It is Māra preventing the people from getting out of his clutches in the sense of escaping from *Māradheyya*. These would, therefore, not come in the category of temptations which are discussed in this paper.

*Māra-Saṃyutta*, comprising 25 Suttas, does contain a number of instances of temptations in which the Buddha or a disciple was involved. S.IV,1 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”<sup>19</sup>.

In another (S.IV,13) 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”<sup>20</sup>.

Again, S.IV,20 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 approved the Buddha and persuaded him to govern righteously. Apparently, the temptation, was for the Buddha to resume a royal career so as to rescue those suffering from the cruelty of rulers<sup>21</sup>.

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

19. NĀNAMOLI, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

21. MALALASEKERA, *op. cit.*, p. 617.

*Bhikkhuṇi-saṃyutta*, in particular, gives ten similar accounts of temptations which *bhikkhuṇis* had experienced in lonely places. Here, too, the statements, attributed to Māra or the *bhikkhuṇi* concerned and often both, are in verse. For example, it was Kisā-Gotami, who was addressed thus by Māra: –

“How now? Doest sit alone with tearful face  
As mother sticken by the loss of child?  
Thou who has plunged into the woods alone  
Is it a man that thou hast come to seek?”<sup>22</sup>

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

To this same pattern falls the episode narrated in the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinaya Piṭaka*. 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 are thou by all the snares,  
Both those of devas and of men,  
In great bondage art thou bound,  
Recluse; thou’lt not be freed from me”.

The Buddha contradicts fervently and Māra disappears.

The recurring concept 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.IV, 25), which starts with the story of the *Padhāna-Sutta* and continues to describe how the vanquished Māra “sat down cross-legged on the

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22. MAURICE WINTERNITZ, *A History of Indian Literature* (Tr. V. Sirinivasa Sarma), Vol. 11, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1983, p. 56.

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 S.IV,24 gives the impression that this incident takes place seven years after enlightenment, when all the efforts of Māra to discover the Buddha heedless had failed. The daughters of Māra inquire about the father's despondence and receives 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 men'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”<sup>23</sup>.

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 and the imagery of a personified Māra accompanied by a tenfold army and supported by three

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23. NĀNAMOLI, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

dauhtters, could have originated with the Buddha himself. As a suggestive imagery, it must have epitomized 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"<sup>24</sup>. 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"<sup>25</sup>. But it does not mean that there had been no confusion.

With the four concepts of Māra, which we had 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 Māradēvaputta. With regard to the seven year surveillance of the Buddha by Māra in the *Padhāna-Sutta* and S.IV,25, he says that Māradēvaputta 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 of Pali Canon was completed in its present form.

### III. *Temptations of Māra in Non-Canonical 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 enlightenment had been identified by the time the *Avidure Nidāna* of the *Jātaka*-commentary was composed.

This *Nidāna*, which is perhaps the oldest of the continuous life-stories of the Buddha, mentions six such occasions: —

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24. From Rhys Davids' article on Buddha in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* quoted in MALALASEKERA, *op. cit.*, p. 615.

25. MALALASEKERA, *ibid.*, p. 614.



(i) At the time of the renunciation, when Māra is presented as persuading the future Buddha to return home as he would in seven days be a universal monarch (*Cakkavatti-Mahārājā*)

(ii) During the period of austerity, when the future Buddha was in a very weak condition, urging him to give up the struggle.

(iii) On the eve of the attainment of Buddhahood, where 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 symbolizing enlightenment.

(iv) During the fourth week when Māra is presented as dissuading Buddha from preaching: "if you have realized 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<sup>26</sup>.

(v) Just after the first sixty disciples were sent out on missions, when Māra is shown as trying to convince the Buddha that he had really not liberated himself.

(vi) Just before the Buddha met the thirty Bhaddavaggiya young men, where Māra is presented again as challenging the Buddha's enlightenment.

It would be noted that other encounters individually described in the *Māra-Saṃyutta* had not been included in this list, possibly as they were not connected with an important event or decision in the life of the Buddha. Also to be stressed is that this list is at variance with the information given in the Pali Canon at other places.

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. *Lalita-vistara*, though a later Buddhist Sanskrit work, appears to have been based either on the *Avidure-Nidāna* of 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 *Lalita-*

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26. Compare with S.IV, 24-25 where this event is said to have taken place seven years after enlightenment. Aśvaghoṣa in *Buddhacarita* (Chap. XV) dates it in the fourth week as does the *Avidure Nidāna* of the *Jātaka*.

*vistara* is that “Māra, the wicked one, followed close to the Bodhisatva; as he was practising austerities for six years, seeking and pursuing an entrance”. Such a long period of surveillance suggests the function of Māradēvaputta (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 tempt the Buddha under the Bodhi-tree and their names are Rati, Arati and Trṣṇā<sup>27</sup>. Whereas the Pali sources say that the vanquished Māra drew lines on the ground with a stick or a reed, *Lalita-vistara* 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 as 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: –

(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 Śākyas”. He had also caused apparitions of Yasodharā, Mṛgajā<sup>28</sup> Gopā, Devadatta and other Śākyas to appear. What followed was only an argument in which Māra failed to reason out with 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 reason out, his daughters, who are differently named as Desire, Pleasure and Delight, tried all their allurements in vain.

(iv) When 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.

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27. Spencer Hardy and Bigandet, basing their works on Sinhala and Burmese traditions, have these names as Taṇhā, Rati and Rangā. ROCKHILL, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

28. Mṛgajā is the name in Sanskrit sources for Kisāgotami of the Pali sources. It is she who uttered the lines ‘*Nibbutā nīna sā mātā*’ etc.

(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<sup>29</sup>.

The Chinese Abhiṣkramaṇa-Sūtra has a few more variations. For instance; it says that Māra brought a bundle of official notices purporting to be from Sākya princes to dissuade the future Buddha from continuing with his quest for deliverance<sup>30</sup>.

Whether as a conscious effort in rationalizing 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 the Great Departure; the victory over Māra, described either as *Māravijaya* or *Mārayuddha* (Māra's Assault or the Battle with Māra); and the temptation of Māra's daughters. Each incident acquired embellishments in the hands of poets and creative writers and by about the first century B.C., a number of elements had taken root firmly:

*Renunciation:* Māra appears in the air; 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; the future Buddha desired to turn back and see his city, the earth obliges by turning itself around like a potter's wheel.

*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 make eerie noises to generate fear; rain, hail, showers of fire, thunder, 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 right to the seat on which the future Buddha is seated; the earth is summoned as a witness; the earth

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29. ROCKHILL, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-34.

30. SAMUEL BEAL, *The Romantic Legend of Sakya Buddha*, London, 1875, p. 207.

quakes and Māra and his hosts run in disarray. Māra is dejected and begins to draw lines or scribble on the ground.

*Temptation of Māra's daughters:* They are three in number; they seek to lure the Buddha some time after his enlightenment; dance, song, music and sweet talk are their arsenal as the objective is 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 Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddha-carita* (circa 2nd century A.C.) which devotes two chapters to the victory over Māra (Chapter 13) and the Temptation of Māra's daughters (Chapter 15). Already new elements had begun to appear. Māra comes not only with three daughters named here Rati, Prīti and Trṣṇā but also with three sons Vibhrama (Confusion), Harṣa (Gaiety) and Darpa (Pride). Of course; Māra, himself, is represented as an enemy of the perfect Dharma (*Saddharmaripuḥ*) and is actually called *Kāmadeva*, the God of love:

"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"<sup>31</sup>.

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 flower-shaft nor my arrow "gladdener", not 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 is summoned his army – animal-faced and hideous monsters – which Aśvaghosa describes conjuring many a grotesque appearance. Their collective assault on the future Buddha finds lively description in as

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

many as twenty-three verses. The reaction of the future Buddha is his resolute steadfastness and admonition to Māra to desist from his futile effort:

“Give not way, then, to grief but put on calm;  
let not thy greatness, O Māra, be  
mixed with pride; it is not well to be  
confident, – fortune is unstable – why dost  
thou accept a position on a tottering base”<sup>32</sup>.

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, thou art smitten in thy 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”<sup>33</sup>.

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 in evidence.

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32. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

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, Myanmar and Thailand, the process has continued. The license 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.

Aśvaghoṣa takes up the episode of Māra's daughters in Chapter XV. The Buddha has passed four weeks since enlightenment and Māra comes to him saying "O holy one, be pleased to enter Nirvāṇa, thy 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, two, underwent embellishment and elaboration. Earlier Pali sources as well as *Lalita-vistara* had given an indication of the potential which the theme has both in descriptive poetry 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 had to evoke appropriately a range of emotions among which heroism and eroticism have been specially sought after. The Victory over Māra and the Temptation of Māra's daughters provided the basis for many a creative effort, in rendering to poems on the Buddha – which could otherwise be humdrum or deeply philosophical – a more balanced character in terms of the tenets of ornate poetry. Whether this was permissible had been a question which the Buddhist writers had grappled with from the days of Aśvaghoṣa. 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 would demonstrate even more convincingly.

#### IV. Māra Episodes in Buddhist Art of Asia

Even before the Buddha came to be represented in human form, the Great Departure and the Victory over Māra had become two of the events in the Buddha's life to be depicted at both Sānchi and Amarāvati.

First century B.C. sculptures on the gateways of the Great Stūpa at Sānchi include a scene of the Great Departure<sup>34</sup> and two scenes of Māra's Assault (North gateway) and Defeat (West gateway)<sup>35</sup>. 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 *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

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34. ANIL 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 story-telling in ancient Buddhist sculpture. The horses going to the right are represented as carrying the Bodhisatva, whose presence is symbolized by a royal parasol held above them. The returning horse is led by sorrowing Channa.

35. HEINRICH ZIMMER, *The Art of Indian Asia: its Mythology and Transformation*, Bollingen Series No. XXIX, Pantheon, New York, 1955, Plate XII Northgate rearview, Central architrave; Anil de Silva-Vigier, *op. cit.*, Plate 69. The Majestic-looking 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 be of the early 1st 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. 6. Māra could be the figure on the elephant holding a bow – again, symbolizing the God of Love by his traditional weapon.

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 the Māra's hosts retreat on the right-hand half of the panel, the rejoicing deities are shown as approaching the Bodhi-tree from the left. Apparently, it is Māra who, with bow in hand, rides the elephant. In neither is any overt depiction of the temptation of 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 Amarāvati sculptures of the second century A.C. are two scenes depicting the Great Departure<sup>36</sup> and Māra's Assault<sup>37</sup>. 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 dynamism which the sculptor 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 of Māra's daughters: note the dancing figure on the right.

It is in Gandhāra art, that we notice a further development of the two themes and the emergence of the scene depicting the temptation of Māra's daughters. A sculpture in Lahore Museum<sup>38</sup> shows the future Buddha riding a horse. Around him are depicted two of the four factors which prompted the renunciation: namely, old age and death. A princely figure with a halo, standing on the left hand corner of the panel could be Māra and the wheel-like object at the

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36. ZIMMER, *loc. cit.*, Plate 89.

37. *Ibid.*, Plate 88.

38. A. GRUNWEDEL, *Buddhist Art in India*, tr. A.C. Gibson; revised and enlarged by J. Burgess, London, 1901, p. 98, illustration 50.



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 Gandhāra sculpture appears to be a Great Departure panel<sup>39</sup>. 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 and, hence, this panel, too, might be a representation of this encounter.

The representation of Māra in Gandhāra 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"<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup>. This figure occurs in another sculpture in the Lahore Museum, which depicts the hosts of Māra<sup>42</sup>: an Indianized version of the figure appears in the relief from Lorian Tangai in the Calcutta Museum<sup>43</sup>.

Two Gandhāra sculptures of Māra Assault show further developments in the treatment of the subject. In the Mardan sculpture (now in

39. *Ibid.*, p. 99, illustration 51.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 92, 94.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 88, Fig. 5 in illustration 42.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 96, illustration 48.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 101, illustration 53.

the Peshawar Museum)<sup>44</sup> 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 symbolized by a crouching and a wailing figure (reduced in scale) in front of the future Buddha. The sculpture at the Boston Fine Arts Museum<sup>45</sup> carries out to great detail the symbol of crouching and falling figures.

The exact composition and details of Gandhāra art – with pronouncedly Indian countenances – are to be found in the later sculptures of Amarāvati and Nāgarjunikoṇḍa. 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 future Buddha's seat<sup>46</sup> – are overshadowed by the dancing female figures in the seductive pose of *ardhabhaṅga*. (See the upper frieze of the slab depicting the Stūpa at Amarāvati)<sup>47</sup>.

The finest combination of the attack by the hideous hosts of Māra and the temptation of Māra's daughters is to be found in Ajaṇṭa (Circa 600 A.C.) both in a painting in Cave I and in a sculptured version in Cave XXVI<sup>48</sup>. 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 China<sup>49</sup> and Dambulla<sup>50</sup> and Hindagala<sup>51</sup>, Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, in particu-

44. MARSHALL, *op. cit.*, Plate 43, Fig. 67.

45. *Ibid.*, Plate 44, Fig. 68.

46. ZIMMER, *loc. cit.*, 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 (Nagarjunikoṇḍa).

47. *Ibid.*, Plate 96. In both examples from Amarāvati, the Buddha is depicted with the *Abhaya-mudrā* rather than with the *Bhūmi-sparśa-mudrā*.

48. ANIL DE SILVA-VIGIER, *loc. cit.*, Plates 71 and 72. No figure is readily identifiable as that of Māra, even though the imposing figure, holding a sword, to the right of the Buddha or one to the left with a swaying mace in hand could be considered.

49. BASIL 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.

50. The 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.

51. JEAN BOISSELIER, *Ceylon*, Archeologia Mundi, Nagel, Geneva, Plate 78.

lar, Dambulla where the entire ceiling of the largest cave is devoted to the theme of the Māra's Assault brings together many characteristics which had been progressively incorporated in artistic representation of this event.

A curiously interesting piece of art comes from Qyzyl in Chinese Turkistan<sup>52</sup>. A fresco depicting how the death of the Buddha was announced to king Ajātasattu shows a painting on cloth on major events of the Buddha's life and 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-huang<sup>53</sup> is an highly Cinicized version of Māra's Assault, but the 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 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 war-lord, standing behind them, could be Māra himself.

In Borobudur<sup>54</sup>, we see the continuance of the Indian tradition of sculpture and the panels depicting Māra's Assault and the temptation of Māra's daughters reflect the *Lalitavistara* accounts most faithfully. Specially of interest is the representation of Māra with his thousand arms, wielding a bow. The theme persists in South-east Asia. From Angkor Thom<sup>55</sup> 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-cover<sup>56</sup> from Nepal depicts the daughters of Māra in demure

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Māra is depicted as a demon with many arms and riding a multi-tusked elephant as described in Sri Lankan *Yayamangala Gāthā*, verse I.

52. ZIMMER, *loc. cit.*, Plate 612.

53. ANIL DE SILVA-VIGIER, *loc. cit.*, Plate 73.

54. *Ibid.*, Plate 68 and ZIMMER, *loc. cit.*, Plate 486 (b).

55. DAVID L. SNELGROVE (ed.), *The Image of the Buddha*, Vikas/Unesco, New Delhi, 1978, p. 329, Plate 252.

56. W. ZWALF, *Buddhism: Art and Faith*, British Museum, London, 1985, p. 119, Plate 172.

poses and a wood-carving of the 16th century<sup>57</sup> shows the future Buddha in the BHŪMI-SPARṢA-MUDRĀ surrounded by the hosts of Māra.

In a gradual process to abstract representation of the Māra's Assault, the BHŪMI-SPARṢA-MUDRĀ becomes a short-hand way of recalling the event. From Pagan<sup>58</sup> comes an example where the additional element of the temptation of 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 Nalanda sculpture in which three female figures on the pedestal have grotesque faces, possibly suggesting the association of Māra as a yakṣa or a demon<sup>59</sup>. 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 of 9th century)<sup>60</sup> ultimately becomes identified as one of the Dhyāni Buddhas of the Mahāyāna tradition with the specific name *Akṣobhya* meaning imperturbable – an instance where the quality of steadfastness which the temptations of Māra brought out in the Buddha becomes personified as a separate entity<sup>61</sup>.

Just as the mode of presentation of the temptation scenes underwent change over the centuries, the concept of Māra in the eyes of the people changed. 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<sup>62</sup>. 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 a demon<sup>63</sup>. This change is further seen on

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57. SNELGROVE, *loc. cit.*, p. 347, Plate 272.

58. ZIMMER, *loc. cit.*, Plate 471 (d).

59. *Ibid.*, Plate 380.

60. *Ibid.*, Plate 381.

61. SNELGROVE, *loc. cit.*, p. 135. "Thus often only an inscription or a still living Buddhist tradition in the places where archaeological pieces are found can distinguish ... a Śākyamuni in his victory over Māra (*Māravijaya*) from Akṣobhya." See plates 206, 207, 208, and 210 – pp. 278-210. Plate 206 is significant in that the Buddha is crowned to distinguish him as the supreme Buddha.

62. D.B. DHANAPALA, *The story of Sinhalese painting*, Saman, Maharagama (undated), p. 23 (explanation on p. 18).

63. Siri GUNASINGHE, *An Album of Buddhist Paintings from Sri Lanka (Ceylon)*

the cover of an ola book which depicts Māra not in a temptation scene but in a *Jātaka*<sup>64</sup>. 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<sup>65</sup>. The final evolution of Māra's transformation may quite probably be seen in the Tibetan *Yamāntaka*, who is iconographically represented as a fierce looking demon with multiple arms<sup>66</sup>.

## V. Conclusion

This analysis 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 graphic poetical expressions of the Buddha himself. The early composers of the life of the Buddha had not made 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 of Māra's daughters came to be singled out for detailed treatment in literature and art. Embellishments and variations according to the writer's or the artist's conception of the situation were freely allowed as the allegorical aspect was accepted as the more significant. The historical or factual aspect of the related events was secondary and the diversity of presentation was 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

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(*Kandyan period*), National Museum, Colombo, 1978, Plate 39. Also see BOISSELIER, *loc. cit.*, Plate 78.

64. ZWALF, *loc. cit.*, Plate 217, p. 155.

65. GRUNWEDEL, *loc. cit.*, p. 102, illustration 54.

66. ZIMMER, *loc. cit.*, Plates 603 and 605.

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, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia, he becomes more and more pronouncedly demonic.

This analysis has been limited to Māra in his 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 and an effort made in this direction could be invaluable specially to answer the many questions which Malalasekera had raised in his article in the Dictionary of Pali Proper Names<sup>67</sup>.

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67. See in particular MALALASEKERA, *op. cit.*, pp. 615, 618 and 619.