

Mara and his awesome Daughters

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When Chris first came to me and asked if I'd be able to give a talk on the temptings of Mara and his daughters, I was surprised.

See, where I come from, the whole mara tale isn't really a big deal. My father, whom some of you guys were able to meet last fall, has a rather skeptical interpretation of the story of the Buddha, and the teachings in general. I suppose I take after that.

So having been asked to talk about Mara, the first thing I did was to sit down and try to remember what I could about what I was taught about Mara and his daughters.

The first thing I remember (probably not the most relevant) is that the word Mara (meaning death, or of death), is used in Sri Lanka in a sense similar to the word "awesome" in the USA. So I remember a very young and fresh faced Adeesha sitting down and wondering about who these "Awesome Daughters" were, and then about if they were so awesome, why the Buddha had to go about defeating them to begin with.

And when I did remember the actual stories (there's a reason for the plural; bear with me) I wrote them down. When the Buddha was just about to reach enlightenment, on the very cusp, a message in the wind comes to Mara, lord of death. The voice whispers "Lord of death, your reign is over; The buddha is seated by yonder tree and his meditations are about to bear fruit. Once he has attained that which he seeks (Psst: enlightenment) he will teach others and finally no one will worship, fear and follow you."

Mara gets scared and runs down to the Buddha, atop his awesome elephant with multiple sets of tusks and an army of demonic soliders swirling around him, very scary indeed. Here's a quotation from *The Life of Buddha, by A. Ferdinand Herold, tr. by Paul C Blum*:

Mara's army was a fearful sight. It bristled with pikes, with arrows and with swords; many carried enormous battle-axes and heavy clubs. The soldiers were black, blue, yellow, red, and their faces were terrifying. Their eyes were cruel flames; their mouths spewed blood. Some had the ears of a goat, others the ears of a pig or of an elephant. Many had bodies shaped like a jug. One had the paws of a tiger, the hump of a camel and the head of a donkey; another had a lion's mane, a rhinoceros' horn and a monkey's tail. There were many with two, four and five heads, and others with ten. . .

So with this terribly scary army Mara first tries to scare the enlightenment out of the Buddha, but the Buddha just smiles and nods. After a while, Mara decides that this is not working, and calls his three daughters: Tanha (the maiden of desire), arati (the maiden of fulfilment) and raga (the maiden of regret), and try again to tempt him, this time with lust rather than fear.

Predictably, it doesn't work this time, either.

Defeated, Mara asks the Buddha (hopefully, as I imagine), "Hey, now that you've realized enlightenment, why not keep it to yourself and enjoy it to its fullest in solitude?" But the Buddha doesn't agree, and Mara leaves, defeated.

Now that you know the story of Mara, what does it all mean? First, who or what is Mara? Well, the answer to that is confusing. You see, the story I just told you is just one of the stories that I've heard which describe this point in the Buddha's journey. Honestly, the nature of Mara (and his daughters) entirely depends on the teller of the story.

To be specific, I've heard of Mara as being the personification of Death, Lust, and sometimes even being described like a "deadly sin", or at least a combination of the lot. He's been described as a lord of a minor heaven and a demon in charge of a part of hell.

Even the question of whether there is "A mara" or "Many Maras" is not fully answered.

So the logical question is the same one that you'd ask in a conversation involving fan-fiction: "Which story is canon?". And the answer to that, predictably, is inexact. There are a handful of references to Mara in the Suttas (the pali canon) but none of them describe this particular encounter. This story, on the other hand, seems to have appeared at the same time as the "Jataka Tales," which are a body of buddhist fables (like aesop's but with more elephants) which aren't taken as historical fact by most buddhists.

So why bother about the defeat of Mara in the first place?

Well, as I read different versions of the story online, I came across one that I've never read before, and eventually ended up deciding is my favourite telling. It is a version by a *Joseph Campbell*, and goes a bit like this:

Mara in the form of a demon comes to the Buddha and tries to tempt him by way of fear. Doesn't work. Then Mara appears in the form of Kama (the personification of lust) and his three daughters desire, fulfilment and regret, to tempt the Buddha using lust. Doesn't work. But then, Mara and his host decides to attack the buddha, and something different happens:

The demons all turn into flowers, and Mara transforms as well. Mara is now Dharma, the personification of Duty and truth, and is no longer angry towards the buddha. Quite the opposite - he tells the Buddha "Young man, the events of the world require your attention; go forth and preach." The Buddha smiles as the earth answers for him, saying: "This is my beloved son who has through innumerable lifetimes so given of himself, that there is no body here".

I swear if I translate this to pali in my head it sounds more poetic.

Aside from the happy ending, why did I find this version to be the best? Well, it illustrates what the battle of Mara is, in my understanding: Mara isn't just death, he is the personification of the fear of death and what happens as a result. Fear of death turns one away from sprituality, since spirituality is just the contemplation of death and what comes after. So instead, the fear leads one to look towards the sensual pleasures of physical existence, which are personified by the daughters of mara.

So at the end of the story, Mara's trasnformation shows something I think is important. When you are trying to reach enlightenment, what takes place is not a battle of you against the world (here personified by its gods and demons). Instead, the path is a battle within yourself; to identify and defeat the part of us that is so afraid of dying it can't bear to think about it, instead turning you to the joys of the physical.

So the truth is that the three awesome daughters are to be found inside, and once found, they should be seen for what they are, and in the act of seeing their true nature, one attains the power to defeat them.